

100 GAMES FOR 2018
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SENSE-TINGLING EXCLUSIVE
SPIDER-MAN
HOW INSOMNIAC IS MAKING THE MOST EXCITING GAME OF THE YEAR
THE LAST OF US: PART II
WiLD
DEATH STRANDING
METROID PRIME 4
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EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT ROCKSTAR'S WESTERN EPIC
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"YES, THE WEBS DO ACTUALLY ATTACH TO THE BUILDINGS"
BRYAN INTIHAR, INSOMNIAC
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■ DAYS GONE ■ DREAMS
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■ BIOMUTANT ■ UFO 50
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ISSUE 195

What a year. What a selection of games. What a large pile of things I haven't gotten around to yet. Chances are you're familiar with the term 'pile of shame', but if not we tend to throw it around a fair amount on **games™** and it's essentially all the games we were meaning to play for the year, but haven't get around to yet. And it feels particularly pressing when you reach the year's close and they're still sitting there.

This year, it's a rather large pile, although I take no small amount of pride in the fact I managed to finish *Horizon Zero Dawn* and *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*. Both ate up a lot of playing time, though, so some other things slipped away. At the time of writing I've completed *Super Mario Odyssey*, but not collected everything yet, I have yet to play through *What Remains Of Edith Finch* (our number two game of the year, for crying out loud), I haven't even started on *Persona 5* yet, I've only scratched the surface of *Destiny 2*, *Night In The Woods* and *Tacoma*, I shudder at the thought of where I'll find the time for *Assassin's Creed Origins*, and the idea of starting up *Divinity: Original Sin II* and *Torment: Tides Of Numenera* terrifies me to my core.

Thanks to the pre-Christmas sales I have most of these ready to go, but I honestly don't know when I'll be caught up. And while my pile of shame mocks me as I write this and I'm in the midst of our toughest deadline month, it's also kind of thrilling to know how many great games are still ahead of me. It's been a great year and 2018 is looking fantastic as well.

Jon Gordon

Jonathan Gordon
EDITOR




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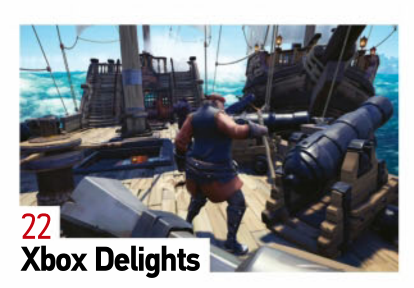
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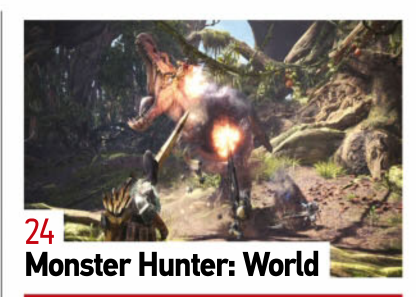

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08 Feature

SPIDER-MAN

PS4's friendly neighbourhood web-slinger leads our massive 2018 preview special as we break down the trends for the coming year





SPIDER-MAN

THE RETURN OF THE WALL CRAWLER IN 2018 IS CERTAINLY SOMETHING TO BE EXCITED ABOUT. INSOMNIAC GAMES' CREATIVE DIRECTOR **BRYAN INTIHAR** IS HERE TO HELP US UNDERSTAND WHY THIS GAME CAN REPRESENT THE BEST OF WHAT GAMING CAN OFFER US

AN UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH EXISTS WITHIN THE VAST WEB OF SPIDER-MAN GAMES, HIDDEN BEHIND THE WELL OF NOSTALGIA, AND OBSCURED BY RAMPANT FAN EXPECTATION. In spite of a variety of studios trying for 35 years, with various degrees of success, we are yet to receive a videogame that truly delivers on the fantasy of being Spider-Man; one that gives an opportunity to confront and navigate the duality at the core of the character, the chance to embody the life of Peter Parker, and experience the insurmountable responsibility that exists in his role as the friendly neighbourhood Spider-Man; a game that can find the balance between each of the various aspects that have helped define the character in the comic book, cinematic and animated entertainment mediums – his acrobatic movement, improvisational combat, and the deeply-sarcastic wit that drives his adversaries into a frenzy and a smile across our faces.

But Insomniac Games, leading development on 2018's PlayStation 4 exclusive Marvel's *Spider-Man*, believes it has what it takes to finally deliver what we've spent so many years waiting for – a videogame that can capture that core *Spider-Man* fantasy, and everything that it should encompass. Is Insomniac the perfect studio for such a task? We'd say yes, and that's an assessment that Marvel would seem to agree with as well. "The great thing is that this opportunity came to us," creative director Bryan Intihar tells us enthusiastically. "Marvel said, 'Hey, we want to work with Insomniac!' And that's awesome for us, because they know exactly what they are getting, right?"

That they should; for us, Insomniac's stewardship is reason enough to get



excited. It feels as if the company has been building up to this opportunity for some time now. "It's all there in our DNA. There's humour, there's emotion and there is heart, but we also have great game mechanics as well. We wanted to bring all of that in," Intihar continues, speaking to a studio legacy that includes the likes of *Ratchet & Clank*, *Resistance*, and *Sunset Overdrive* – games that are unique and progressive in their own right.

That's an important characteristic, because in many respects, Spider-Man should be the character that reflects how far we've come as an industry. To capture his unique characteristics and proficiencies is to demonstrate a mastery over open-world game design and the technology that drives it; spotlighting the renewed importance on narrative design in triple-A gaming, not to mention the refinement of a variety of interconnected combat and movement systems. Insomniac is pushing for its take on *Spider-Man* to cover all of these bases and more. It wants to deliver a truly revolutionary game that will stand as a testament to what the medium is capable of in 2018, a superhero game that simply would not have been possible in the years preceding it.

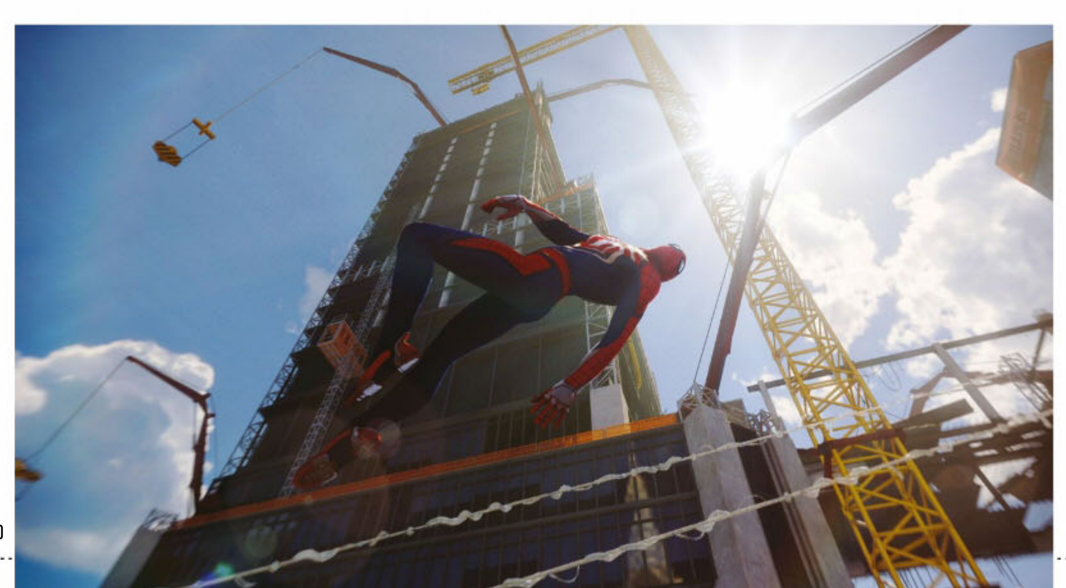
New York City is as much a part of Spider-Man as his web-shooters. For the game to feel right, Insomniac first needed to nail the look, vibe and construction of the city Peter Parker calls home. Thankfully for Insomniac, *Spider-Man* isn't the first open-world game that it has turned its hand to.

That was, of course, 2015's *Sunset Overdrive*. Built exclusively for Xbox One, we had wondered whether the studio would be allowed to leverage the technology and systems it had previously developed for a Sony title. Would Insomniac need to start from scratch as it approached this ambitious new title? Thankfully, Intihar reveals to us, that wasn't the case at all; *Spider-Man* as it exists today simply wouldn't have been possible without the development of *Sunset Overdrive*.

"The experience just gave us a leg up. We knew we were going to have to build New York City and what we needed to do. Knowing that we can now build a city quickly allows us to spend more time on the building and road construction; on making the vehicles, traffic and pedestrians; the environment team can spend more time making each district feel different," he says, noting that the team hasn't had to approach the gargantuan task with dread; instead it knows it can quickly nail out the basics and start early on the specifics.

With the extra time to focus on the details, Insomniac has been able to build the biggest open world in its history, although that was driven by necessity as much as it was anything else. "The map is much, much bigger than *Sunset*

"THIS GAME IS ABOUT PUSHING TRAVERSAL BEYOND SWINGING, ON PLAYING UP THE IMPROVISATIONAL NATURE OF SPIDER-MAN, AND THEN DELIVERING THE HUMAN NATURE OF THE CHARACTER"
BRYAN INTIHAR
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, INSOMNIAC GAMES

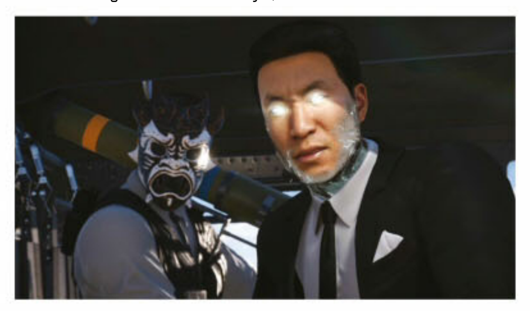




■ *Spider-Man* fans rejoice! Peter Parker will *not* have organic webs; instead Insomniac has redesigned his mechanical web-shooters. They are now small bracelets, which means Peter can use his webbing, even if he doesn't have time to change.



■ Above: The only villains revealed so far are Mr. Negative and Shocker, although we've been told to expect plenty more familiar, fan-favourite faces. With Norman Osborne running for re-election as mayor, we wouldn't rule out the arrival of the Green Goblin either.





Overdrive's. One of the reasons it actually has to be bigger is because Spider-Man moves a lot faster than our *Sunset* character did, so we had to compensate for that by making sure the city felt really big and alive," Intihar continues, explaining that this has only been possible as the team continues to develop the technical systems it worked on for *Sunset*. "We could leverage our [experience] from *Sunset*; even technical things like streaming," he considers, noting that streaming – the system that ensures that the content populating the game world can be fed onto your screen without pop-in, slowdown or loading times – had to be right because of how quickly the character is able to traverse the environments. That's a challenge that the team is overtly familiar with.

Sunset Overdrive is certainly important to Intihar. Not only did he serve as executive producer on the project, but it also exists as proof that Insomniac was more than capable of tackling a project that was as difficult as this: "I remember one of the first *Sunset Overdrive* reviews I ever read, and someone actually wrote, 'Insomniac would be perfect for making a *Spider-Man* game' and I was like Cut, Paste, Save," he says, laughing. "With traversal, the *Sunset* character had such a sense of flow, fluidity and style. Well, add a web to it and that's what we are trying to do here!"

Back in 2004, Treyarch released *Spider-Man 2*. It has stood the test of time because of its city navigation – arguably the only game to come close to capturing the feel of Spider-Man's high-flying acrobatics. Until now, that is.

"When it comes to traversal, one thing we wanted to do is to make sure that swinging through the city feels awesome," Intihar continues, clearing up one important detail with another hearty laugh. "I know there are some hardcore people out there and *yes*, the webs do actually attach to the buildings – they don't just attach to the sky, I know that's a big thing for some people."

Insomniac has designed a physics-based traversal system that, while reminiscent of the one seen in *Spider-Man 2*'s, has been updated to make use of modern animation and path-finding techniques. Insomniac is putting a huge focus on world navigation; being able to swing across the Manhattan skyline unhindered is key, but so too is the ability to chain fluid motions together to allow for movement that's as graceful to behold as it is awesome – a *Spider-Man* experience in which you are able to leap, vault, swing and dodge seamlessly without losing momentum or without encountering frustration points.

Insomniac has been focusing a lot of its energy on figuring out traversal, Intihar tells us. While the use of a physics-based system allows for more fluidity and flow in Spidey's movements, the team is aware that it needed to have a deeper bank of animations to really capture the spirit and essence of the character. "Two of the things we've been working on are the sense of speed and adding a lot more variety to our animations. So you'll see more of the classic poses that you've seen from the comics, but also just a lot more flair and sense of style."

"This is a concrete jungle gym that he is flying through. We obviously want to have a level of accessibility, but then also some skill in it," he says, explaining why this balance is so important to the studio. "Since this is Spider-Man eight years later, there's a sense of experience with Peter doing this… there should be a sense of expression [in his movement], and that's something we keep adding on."

As you may have gathered, this isn't a *Spider-Man* origin story – lord knows we've had plenty of those already. Insomniac is setting this in 2018, the opening of the game revolving on a climactic battle with Kingpin; Peter Parker is eight years into his career at this stage, »

ON THE INTRODUCTION OF MILES MORALES…

One of the biggest mysteries of Insomniac's *Spider-Man* is the role that Miles Morales will play in the ongoing story. The character, debuting in 2011 as a part of Marvel Ultimates Earth-610 realm, is one of the most exciting characters to arrive in the Marvel U in recent history – and he's set to have a big role in the PS4 exclusive – although that wasn't always going to be the case, Intihar has revealed.

"So, Miles didn't start out with as big of a role as he has now. But as we started doing more and more research on the character, I went back and just started reading more and more and more," says Intihar. "I'll be honest, I just fell in love with the character. Just like MJ can provide a different perspective on the world, I thought Miles and his relationship to Peter brings something different."

While the studio isn't willing to give us a ton of details on The Ultimates' Spider-Man, we have been able to gleam a little. Introduced as a volunteer at F.E.A.S.T., alongside Aunt May and starring villain Martin Li, Miles is a 15-year old student of Midtown High School, and will be used to demonstrate how much Peter has grown as a character. He serves as a mentor figure to the would-be Spider-Man, giving us yet another window into the responsibilities a more adult Peter Parker will have to balance in this world.

"Miles is younger than Peter, and what they experience, and how they get into each other's lives is pretty unique. I said off the bat that we wanted to make a unique *Spider-Man* universe, one that obviously takes cues from the comics and movies, but also does something unique and different… I'm pretty excited about him and where we take him," Intihar says, continuing. "It's going to be something. It's going to surprise people."



ON THE INFLUENCE OF SPIDER-MAN HOMECOMING…

Given the popularity of *Spider-Man Homecoming*, we were eager to see whether Insomniac had gleaned any insight into what fans are looking for from the character. Intihar assures us that it's been a useful exercise, although Marvel is letting it do its own thing. "It's not like we went 'oh my god, now we have to make a 15-year-old Peter Parker'," laughs Intihar. "I just think it's more 'well, how did they execute some of the DNA into what they've done', right? Situational humour they did really well, and that's kind of our mantra too; one thing I think that *Homecoming* did really well is that it wasn't just about Peter; it was about his best friend; it was about the love interest; it was about his aunt; and then it was about a really good connection between him and The Vulture. And it's like, okay, that's the DNA, but they just went about it in a different way. For us, it was about knowing whether we were off in any way… instead of saying 'well now we need to have Vulture, and we have to make sure he is playing in high school'. I think I've seen that movie about 20 times already; it definitely resonated with people, so what is it about that that we can apply to our 20-year-old Peter Parker?"



Insomniac has promised that the final game will feature alternative suits – "a lot of them!" – and the team is working closely with Marvel to select and finalise the most appropriate. (Marvel, if you're reading, we'll pay good DLC money for Scarlet Spider's hoodie outfit).





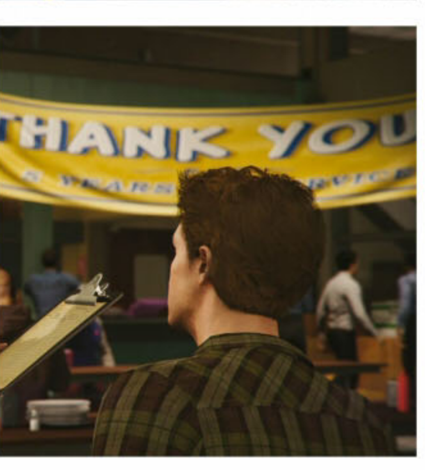












with much of his attention focused on taking Wilson Fisk out of the picture. Of course, removing a power this large from the frame of NYC creates something of a power vacuum, one Mr. Negative – and his alter ego, Martin Li – is only too eager to fill. "Mr. Negative is great for us because you get to see Peter's worlds colliding," Intihar says, and that's because of Li's position as founder of F.E.A.S.T. – a humanitarian organisation that counts Aunt May as one of its employees. "People know Kingpin and people know Shocker, but not as many people know Mr. Negative right away. But I think when they play the game, they are going to find something pretty compelling and awesome… to be honest, there has been a lot of *Spider-Man* games, and he hasn't been featured; he's a newcomer, but he offers a good challenge. If you look at the design side, having the Inner Demons, and the abilities that they have, offers a lot of challenge to the player. That was one of the reasons we chose Mr. Negative [as the lead villain]."

It's been important for Insomniac to ensure that the story is given the same attention as the movement and combat systems. "For me," continues Intihar, "this game is about pushing traversal beyond swinging; on playing up the improvisational nature of *Spider-Man*, and then delivering the human nature of the character – we want to deliver a very human story."

Set in its own universe, away from Earth-616 and the various cinematic and spin-off worlds that have been brought into being over the last few decades, Insomniac is looking to delve into the perils of being Peter Parker at the age of 23. "To really deliver a true *Spider-Man* experience, you have to also see the Peter Parker side of his life, and really deliver on that human element. I think one of the reasons that he is so beloved is that he has that vulnerability and relatability. When Peter succeeds, Spider-Man fails, and vice versa," Intihar says, confirming that there will indeed be sections of the game in which you play as Peter Parker, struggling to maintain a healthy work/life balance.

While Intihar hasn't detailed the exact nature of these missions, he's keen to point out that the majority of the experience will indeed be in the tight-fitting costume (which *isn't* latex, apparently). Instead, the purpose of these sections is to give us a chance to humanise the world and the characters outside of super heroics, and that's also why we will get a chance to play as Mary Jane Watson. "It's a different perspective," he explains, noting that this won't be MJ the club owner or model, but an investigative reporter for the *Daily Bugle*. "I said off the bat that we wanted to make a unique *Spider-Man* universe; one that obviously takes cues from the comics and movies, but also does something unique and different… we really want to blend story and gameplay as much as we can."



"ONE OF THE REASONS THAT HE IS SO BELOVED IS THAT HE HAS THAT VULNERABILITY AND RELATABILITY. WHEN PETER SUCCEEDS, SPIDER-MAN FAILS"

BRYAN INTIHAR
CREATIVE DIRECTOR, INSOMNIAC GAMES

While Peter may well be struggling in his personal life, behind on his rent and struggling to maintain friendships with the likes of MJ and Harry Osborne – oh, and for any of you wondering, his relationship with Mary Jane is best described as "it's complicated!" laughs Intihar – Parker is in his element as Spider-Man, and that is going to be reflected in his approach to combat.

"When it comes to combat, I think it's the improvisational nature of him that we wanted to focus on," says Intihar, only willing to tease what we should expect from Spidey's all-important fighting style. "To us, he's not a brawler – he's more of an acrobatic improviser. We're really leveraging the idea of him being able to look at a situation – of reading the room to see what he can do, whether it's pre-combat or in the middle of it – and blending between melee, using his webs, environmental reactions, and mixing gadgets in with it all. For me, I think that's really important – that Spider-Man is able to switch between those four elements as fast as possible."

Spider-Man presents something of a problem for game designers. As a character, he abides by a clearly defined moral compass; a set of guiding principles and code of ethics that have been etched into his heart by Uncle Ben – the father-figure whose murder sets Peter on his journey from garage wrestler to nuisance hero. That means that many fairly typical videogame design tropes suddenly become obstacles.

"It *has* been a challenge," Intihar admits. "Now we are making this game, we're making missions and it's like '*well*, can we set this here? What happens if there is a burning building? Because Spider-Man isn't going to let these people die'," he says, also noting that the character's position on murder (not favourable) and stealing from characters (also not favourable) presents a variety of other issues. Looting is a staple of open-world game design and resource management – what do you do when this has been removed? Decimating enemies is all well and good, until you are throwing them into harm's way – what happens then? These are all elements that the studio is aware of and doing its best to address internally. "It's just something we have to think about. We have a lot of creative people at the studio – more creative than me," he says, laughing, "who think of ways that we can get around some of those obstacles."

Spider-Man is a character that often has an array of insurmountable obstacles in front of him. In many respects, Insomniac faces a rather similar set of challenges. However, we are extremely confident that 2018 will bring the Spider-Man game we have always dreamed of playing to PlayStation 4. Insomniac understands the character and what makes him work, his motivations and the demands of his movement and combat. Our excitement for the following year of gaming stems from Spider-Man, the superhero who can represent the very best of what our industry can offer in its purest, most entertaining form.

SHOCK AND GORE

CAN ULTRAVIOLENCE EXIST ALONGSIDE NUANCED STORYTELLING?

GOD OF WAR
PS4
SIE Santa Monica
Early 2018

FAR CRY 5
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Ubisoft Montreal
27 February 2018

DAYS GONE
PS4
SIE Bend Studio
TBC 2018

2018 IS GOING TO BE A LANDMARK YEAR FOR THE INDUSTRY – this much should be clear by now; after all, this issue of **games™** has dedicated 49 pages to investigating the biggest and most exciting releases that have been revealed for it thus far. Look closely enough and you'll see a handful of studios attempting to do something quite extraordinary. As an industry, the biggest franchises – the ones that truly stand the test of time – have a tendency to be built on pillars of increasing gratuity; they tap into something primal, a lust for blood cast out across some of the most gorgeous settings known to entertainment.

What remains to be seen is whether this can be appropriately blended with experimental and nuanced storytelling. This is an area Naughty Dog has found great success with in the last decade, but, admittedly, not all studios are built equally. This is why we now find ourselves looking to the next crop of studios pushing gore and emotional depth as their foundation.

SIE Santa Monica has been building games in the God Of War series since 2005, and it has chosen 2018 to relaunch it entirely. On the surface, 2018's ***God Of War*** **[1]** looks like more of the same, right? Kratos is back, only this time he's sporting a big beard and is tasked with punishing a whole new host of antagonists. The action is shifting away from Greek tragedy, focusing its lens on the power and chaos of Norse Mythology. But the studio is treating this as a soft reboot, redeveloping all of its core gameplay systems and mechanics – pushing more of its resources into storytelling, looking to shift Kratos' priorities away from merely punishing a pantheon of gods in cruelly ironic ways.

Kratos has taken to mastering his rage, finding himself driven by a desire to protect his son Atreus from a violent and deadly world – the Norse gods are aware of what happened to Olympians and are taking steps to avoid a similar fate. With the camera shifting towards a more over-the-shoulder viewpoint, not to mention the loss of the fabled double-chained blades, *God Of War* is hoping to overcome its perception problems and prove that it's got more to it than ultraviolence. The fate of Atreus' mother is central to the story, as too is how Kratos got his hands on that elemental battle axe you've seen in action over the last two years of teasing, but what remains to be seen is whether a more considered approach to storytelling will find a happy balance with the frantic action that SIE Santa Monica established the franchise around.

> "WE ARE NOW LOOKING TO THE NEXT CROP OF STUDIOS PUSHING GORE AND EMOTIONAL DEPTH AS THEIR FOUNDATION"

In all honesty, this is the biggest question surrounding so many of these releases. Just look to ***Far Cry 5*** **[2],** a title that is finally shifting its action away from tropical paradises and into mainland USA. Ubisoft Montreal is looking to breathe new life into its long-standing series; *Far Cry 5* has waded into a political firestorm, with its central premise revolving around a deputy sheriff attempting to wrestle control of the fictional Hope Country, Montana, away from a group of religious zealots – Americans that have taken to protecting themselves from the "inevitable collapse" of society by any means necessary.

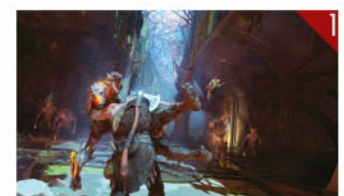
This is uncharted territory for the Far Cry franchise. It has found great success in recent years, throwing an array of larger-than-life protagonists at us and in letting us romp around sprawling exotic open worlds. But now's the time where we will see if Ubisoft Montreal has what it takes to meld a heavily politicised story with its free-flowing combat within a location a little more recognisable. There's a lot riding on *Far Cry 5*: we've seen enough of it behind closed doors over the last six months to know that it's worth your time and energy, but the success of its storytelling will only be judged when we have the full, final release in our hands.

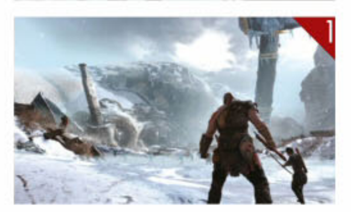
When dealing with releases on the horizon it's difficult to deal in absolutes. That's particularly true for ***Days Gone*** **[3]**; SIE Bend Studio is making its return to triple-A development and it's an exciting proposition. That said, it's also one that's shrouded in mystery. Action-adventure games thrashed out across a post-apocalyptic open world shouldn't really be anything to shout about, but there's something about the core premise here that we can't help but get drawn into it. Bend is hoping players engage with the realities of its brutal and unforgiving world – what's more dangerous, those desperately trying to survive the end of the world or the mindless hordes transformed into natural born killers by a global pandemic? That's something we'll be exploring in *Days Gone* as we join drifter Deacon St. John on the road. Much like *Far Cry 5* and *God Of War*, *Days Gone* is trying to bring excellent mechanics and systems together with storytelling that explores the fractured and frayed edges of humanity. It's something we are going to see more of in the coming years, and these titles stand on the precipice of leading the charge.



Above: There's a softer heart to *God Of War* this time around than we've experienced before. The burning rage of the past remains, but it's tempered by the presence of Kratos' son.



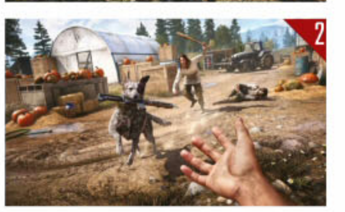




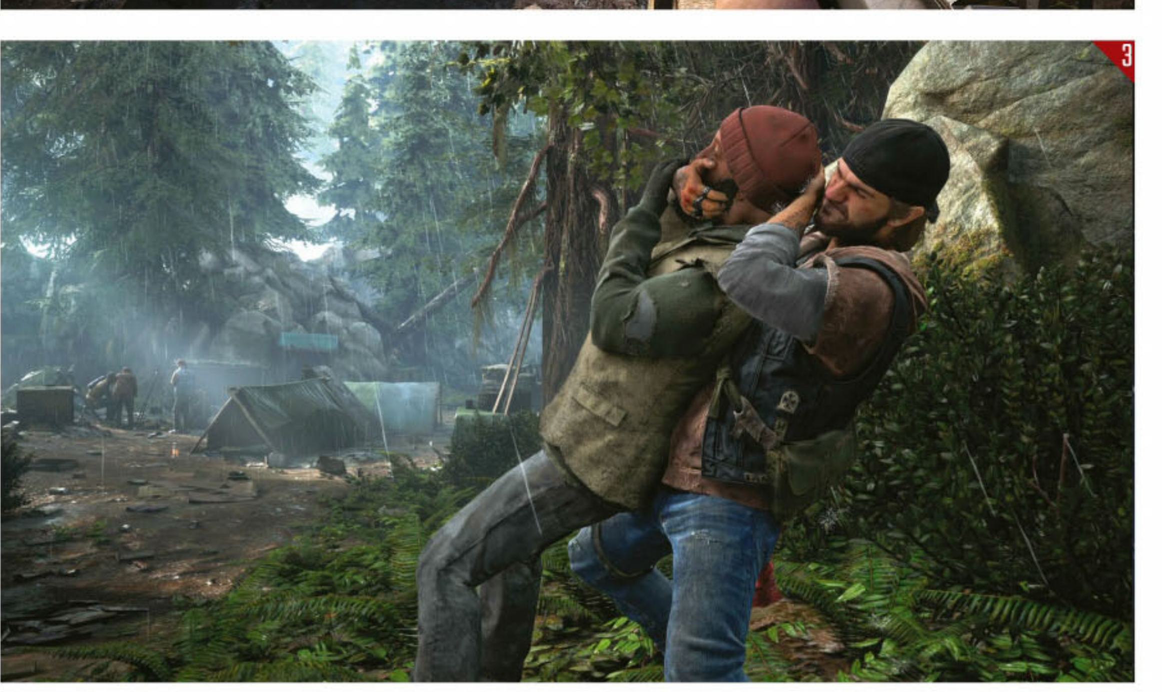
■ God Of War is returning this year, being softly relaunched as Kratos heads into the fire and fray of Norse Mythology.







■ Say what you will about Far Cry, but this fifth mainline instalment features some absolutely sublime gunplay and audio design.





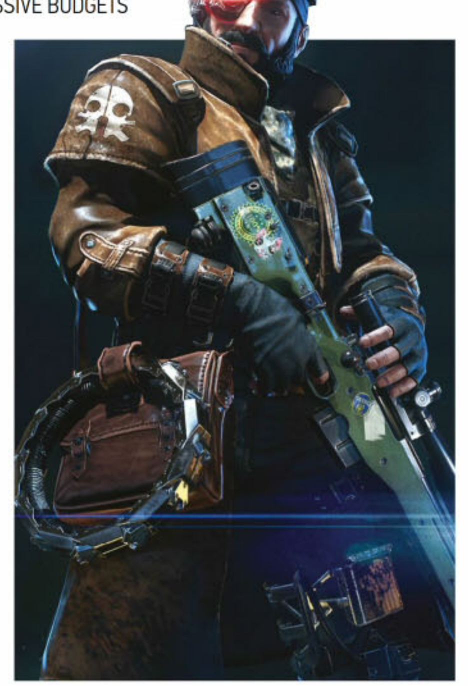


■ *Days Gone* still needs to prove itself, but we can't help but be drawn into the core concept. It's a world we're excited to explore.

THE SMALL TEAMS WITH BIG IDEAS

THE GAMES BRINGING INNOVATION WITHOUT THE MASSIVE BUDGETS





A WAY OUT

■ PS4, Xbox One, PC | ■ Hazelight Studios | ■ Q2 2018

[1] Delivering a co-op narrative experience with branching paths that can only be played with two people is going to prove challenging, but we couldn't have more faith in the former developer of *Brothers: A Tale Of Two Sons*. This story focuses on a different kind of brotherhood between two escaped convicts as they get out of prison and make their getaway. A little grittier and more realistic than the magical realm of *Brothers*, but we're expecting something no less emotional by the end.



ASHEN

■ Xbox One, PC | ■ Aurora44 | ■ TBC 2018

[2] Started by a couple of former Weta Digital artists, the team behind *Ashen* has expanded to nearly 40 people from what we've heard and yet still its take on an action role-player with a heavy hint of Dark Souls at its core remains mightily impressive. For one thing, we love the art style, with its faceless heroes and muted colours. There's a lot of life and texture to the way the world is animated and laid out, but it has a lifeless, drained quality to it, too, that works really well. It's another hot ID@Xbox property.



FE

■ PS4, Xbox One, Switch, PC | ■ Zoink | ■ Q2 2018

[3] It feels like a fair while since EA revealed this new indie-spirited title from the maker of *Zombie Vikings*, a follow-up for the EA Originals program to the eye-catching *Unravel*. If anything, *Fe* is even more dazzling to behold, but it's the environmental structures and communication that has us intrigued. Since the fox-like creature Fe can interact and communicate with the world around it using its songs, and it learns new songs from the forest, all sorts of things can be achieved.



PHOENIX POINT

■ PC | ■ Snapshot Games | ■ Q4 2018

[4] With a pitch promising a fusion of Fallout and X-COM, it's no wonder that *Phoenix Point* managed to exceed its funding goal on Fig by 53 per cent. That concept alone would be enough to grab anyone's attention. Throw in the leadership of X-COM creator Julian Gollop and you have something very promising indeed. With an alien threat that can evolve and incorporate multiple species of DNA into its design, this should create some fascinating strategic possibilities.



WiLD

■ PS4 | ■ Wild Sheep Studio | ■ TBC 2018

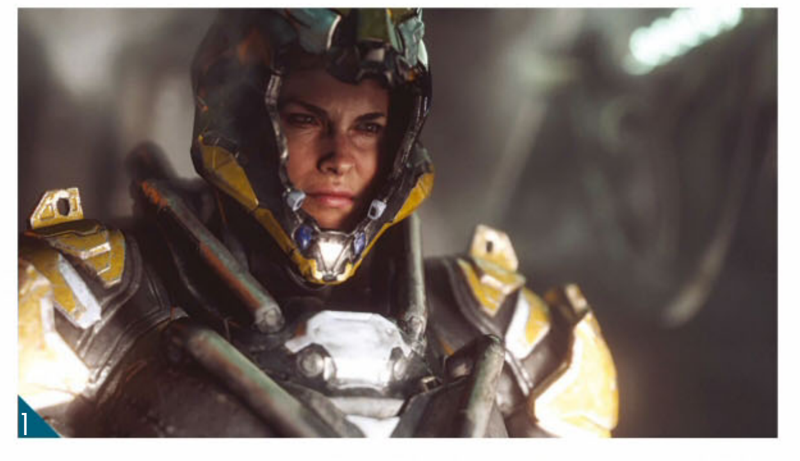
[5] Its been more than two years since Michel Ancel revealed this fascinating, procedurally generated survival game and in that time he has re-revealed his magnum opus, *Beyond Good & Evil 2*, but that doesn't mean the project is dead. Thankfully, Ancel was happy to put fears to rest in the summer, telling Instagram followers, "We're working hard on *Wild* too!!!" Its mixture of wildlife simulation, titanic deities and mysticism set in a lush and varied world means it's still high on our watchlist.


LIFE...WHERE'S
THE PAUSE BUTTON?
With so many demands from work, home and family, there never seem to be enough hours in the day for you. Why not press pause once in a while, curl up with your favourite magazine and put a little oasis of 'you' in your day.
PRESS PAUSE
ENJOY A MAGAZINE MOMENT
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"TARGETING THE SHARED-WORLD EXPERIENCE OF THE LIKES OF DESTINY AND THE DIVISION, ANTHEM PROMISES TO BE A MASSIVE OPEN-WORLD, CO-OP SHOOTER WITH A PVE FOCUS"

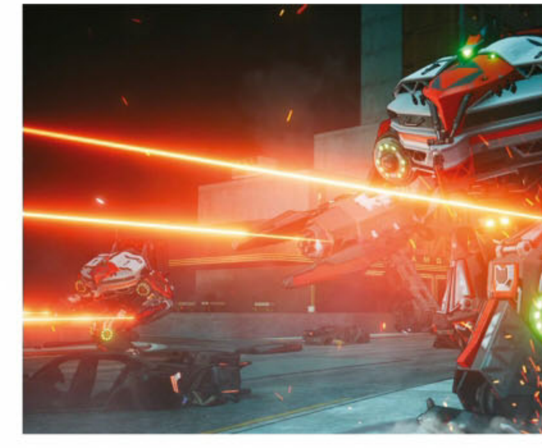
■ Above: *Anthem* has a lot of attention on it after EA's troubles with the Star Wars brand. *Battlefront II* has got us worried about online monetisation, and the closure of Visceral has us somewhat worried about solo campaign investment. *Anthem* seems well placed to answer both issues.

■ Right: The animation and detail in *Anthem* right now is looking incredible. It looks like BioWare has really mastered the Frostbite engine after its experiences with *Dragon Age Inquisition* and *Mass Effect: Andromeda*.











THE GROUND-BREAKERS

CHECK OUT THE GAMES OF 2018 THAT ARE REALLY GOING TO SHAKE UP THE INDUSTRY

ANTHEM
PS4, Xbox One, PC
BioWare
Q4 2018

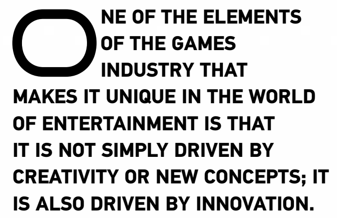
CRACKDOWN 3
Xbox One, PC
Sumo Digital, Reagent Games, Ruffian Games, Cloudgine
TBC 2018

STAR CITIZEN
PC
Cloud Imperium Games
TBC 2018

BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Ubisoft Montpellier
TBC 2018



Below: *Crackdown 3* is maintaining the series' association with something close to a cel-shaded, comic-book style of art direction, but the added grunt of the Xbox One X in 4K should make it really sing.



ONE OF THE ELEMENTS OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY THAT MAKES IT UNIQUE IN THE WORLD OF ENTERTAINMENT IS THAT IT IS NOT SIMPLY DRIVEN BY CREATIVITY OR NEW CONCEPTS; IT IS ALSO DRIVEN BY INNOVATION. 'What if…' are two of the most powerful words in our industry, and 2018 has some of the most ambitious and innovative experiences that we've seen in the last few years.

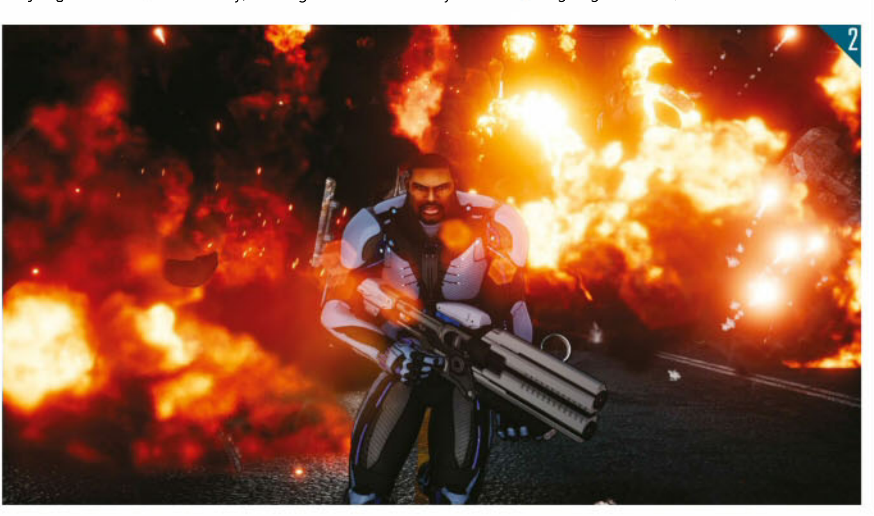
Leading the charge for us is ***Anthem*** **[1]** for a number of reasons. For a start, it's got the most enticing pedigree, as BioWare is looking after it and is moving into a pretty new style of game. Targeting the shared-world experience of the likes of *Destiny* and *The Division*, *Anthem* promises to be a massive open-world, co-op shooter with a PvE focus (no PvP confirmed just yet, but highly likely we would think). It's also the focus of our attention because of the recent history of both the developer and publisher. BioWare's *Mass Effect: Andromeda* was not a massive success commercially or critically, although it was handled by a different team. And EA hasn't covered itself in glory when it comes to online shooters after the fallout from loot boxes in *Star Wars Battlefront II*. That puts a lot of pressure and scrutiny on a project that had already turned heads at an impressive E3 presentation on the Xbox One stage.

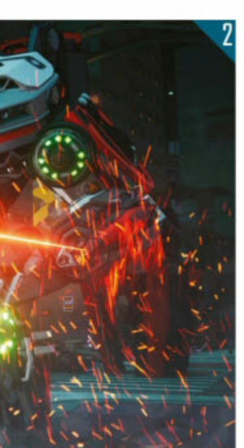
Additionally, after the closure of Visceral and the cancellation of its single-player Star Wars project, there's been a lot of focus on EA moving away from the single-player-only space, where it can't monetise a longer experience on the back-end. Anthem's creative director Brenon Holmes has been pretty active on social media (and Reddit in particular), answering fan questions, and – thanks to that – a slightly more detailed story behind the making of the game and its intentions going forward can be pieced together. For a start, the loot box controversy hasn't been missed by the Edmonton outfit, with Holmes telling fans that loot boxes are "an ongoing discussion," and that "a bunch of folks on the team have similar positions on monetisation… so that perspective is definitely represented."

So that's the world in which *Anthem* is going to launch, and it threatens to be a bumpy landing, but there's a lot about this game that excites us a great deal, not least its potential narrative design and structure. You see, shared-world shooters are nothing new, but even as fans of *Destiny* and *The Division*, we have to admit they didn't nail the story element all that well. Weaving incredible stories into a role-playing experience is BioWare's greatest strength, and it has one of its greatest scribes – Drew Karpyshyn of *KOTOR*, *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2* fame – on the case. If Karpyshyn and the other writers can weave a narrative into this world of Javelin mech suits, giant monsters and wild storms that really drives the whole experience forwards, we might get one of the most engaging and powerful shared shooters ever made.

For shared experiences though, we have to turn to the Xbox One and ***Crackdown 3*** **[2]** for some of the greatest technical innovation. Microsoft has been keeping very quiet about its massive shooter experience of late, showing only the solo gameplay at the most recent industry events, but we all know that cloud processing is where the real interest lies. In case you've not been keeping track or the concept has slipped your memory, *Crackdown 3* has been promising up to ten players a 100 per cent destructible online environment in an open-world sandbox (equivalent in size to previous *Crackdown* titles at the very least). All of that random destruction – with a detailed physics engine calculating every slab of stone, metal girder and wooden plank that gets split and splintered – is going to be supported by Cloudgine's cloud-based processing technology. That means that rather than relying on the CPU, *Crackdown 3* will outsource some of those tabulations to a cloud server, keeping your frame-rate up.

The potential of this technology is fairly plain, and seeing it in action is absolutely spectacular (although it's

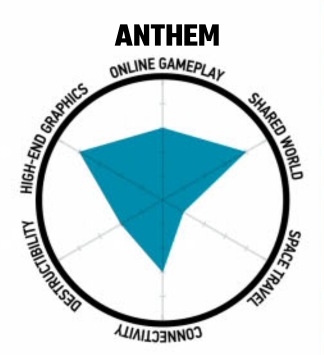




THE AMBITION MATRIX

How these four games are pushing the boundaries of what we thought games could achieve

ANTHEM



CRACKDOWN 3



STAR CITIZEN



BEYOND GOOD & EVIL 2





The scale, fidelity and mechanical breadth of *Star Citizen* is frankly insane. No one game should be attempting to do so many things in one package, but Cloud Imperium Games seems to be pulling it off.

been a little while since the last *Crackdown 3* demo of this portion of the game). This Microsoft series – started by *GTA* creator David Jones, who returns to the series for this sequel – has been synonymous with bombastic action, big weapons and even bigger explosions from the start, and the promise of a ten-player sandbox of mayhem is very enticing. While the single-player will keep the city intact without any cloud assistance, it should still offer the kind of fun playground of gunplay that we've come to expect from this series. Demos from earlier this year left us a little underwhelmed, but we're confident that given the game was delayed from its original November launch date, everything about it will be getting a little more polish to make it as exciting as possible.

When it comes to open-world scale and ambition, though, there's nothing bigger than ***Star Citizen* [3]**, a game that has garnered a mass of attention since its Kickstarter launch in 2012, not least because of the $164,621,688 it has raised in funding from fans (at the time of writing). But that money is being funnelled into something quite extraordinary. The most recent revelation came from CitizenCon in October, when Chris Roberts, creator of *Star Citizen* and the classic *Wing Commander* from which so much of this title's fanbase has been derived, showed off a new build of the MMO portion of the game that would follow this year. In it we got to see an Earth-sized planet that was entirely urbanised. That's a city the size of a planet, procedurally generated and full of detail. On the surface it looks like something straight out of *Blade Runner* or *Ghost In The Shell*, with smoke, neon lights, grimey street corners – the full works. Powered by CryEngine, Roberts has been promising from the beginning that it wanted to achieve *Crysis*-levels of detail in its massive environments, and so far, on the evidence we've seen, that's really happening.

But never mind the detail – look at the scale. *Star Citizen* in its MMO form is an entire universe of systems and planets that can be landed on and launched from at your whim, not unlike *No Man's Sky* in its fluidity. Between the worlds you have space stations, AI characters, others ships and more to interact with, as well as a whole suite of gameplay mechanics to draw from, such as a space-combat system, FPS gameplay, and role-playing conversations.

Star Citizen has not been without its controversy, of course, having been in development for so long, and with no clear final release date, but backers are getting the game piece by piece, helping to shape the product. The game is ultimately playable right now, albeit not in its complete and final form, but still incredibly enjoyable and stunning to look at. Once it all comes together, including a single-player campaign starring Gary Oldman, Gillian Anderson, Andy Serkis and Mark Hamill, *Star Citizen* promises to be one of the most spectacular and involved videogames ever released.

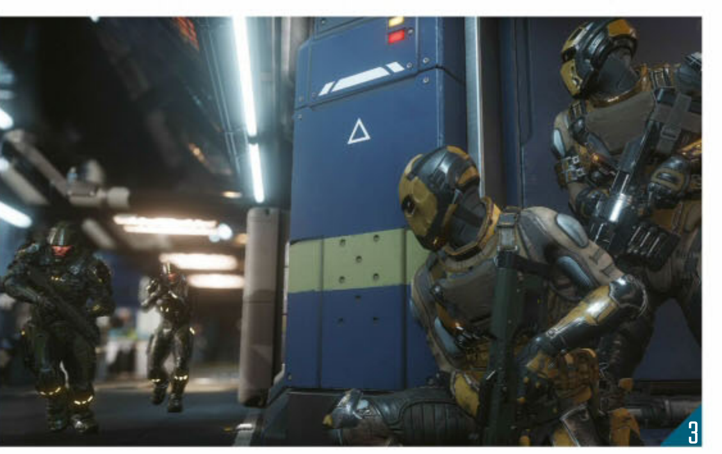
On a smaller scale, but perhaps just as impressive given its relative lack of resources and the limitations of releasing on consoles as well as PC, ***Beyond Good & Evil 2* [4]** is going far above and beyond anything we might have imagined a sequel to Michel Ancel's 2003 action game would attempt. Where the original was a narratively driven, third-person, melee-combat supported, platforming adventure, *BG&E2* is an open-world, space-faring, massively scaled and customisable action experience. We would have settled for more of the same with some new parkour navigation, as was once leaked for this game many years ago, but it appears that Ancel's hopes are set much, much higher.

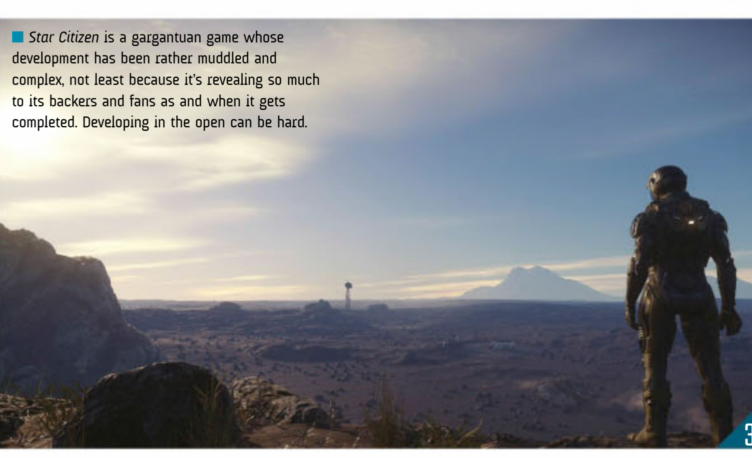
Rather than focusing on the gameplay or action of the original game, Ancel wants to explore the world and class themes that come out of having human and animal hybrids living together. As a result, your character in the game will be created and customised by you, and your crew will be recruited based on who you want to work with. But you will be outlaws, that much seems set in stone. The scale of the game, though, is very impressive. Perhaps not galaxies and universes big like *Star Citizen*, but certainly allowing for ships to be flown from planet surface to orbit, and from planet to planet in a star system seamlessly. What's more, there will be multiple land masses on planets and multiple full-size cities to land on. That's mightily impressive.

Now that we think about it, *Beyond Good & Evil 2* is almost a mix of *Star Citizen* and *Anthem*, as it also offers jetpack gameplay and third-person action like BioWare's game, as well as hover bikes and space travel like *Star Citizen*. And all of it in a bright, vibrant, culturally rich game world.

Between them, *Anthem*, *Crackdown 3*, *Star Citizen* and *Beyond Good & Evil 2* represent the best of what we have come to expect from the games industry in terms of bold ideas, innovation and iteration. These games are going bigger and bolder than anything that has come before, and that makes them very exciting indeed.

"STAR CITIZEN IN ITS MMO FORM IS AN ENTIRE UNIVERSE OF SYSTEMS AND PLANETS THAT CAN BE LANDED ON AND LAUNCHED FROM AT YOUR WHIM"





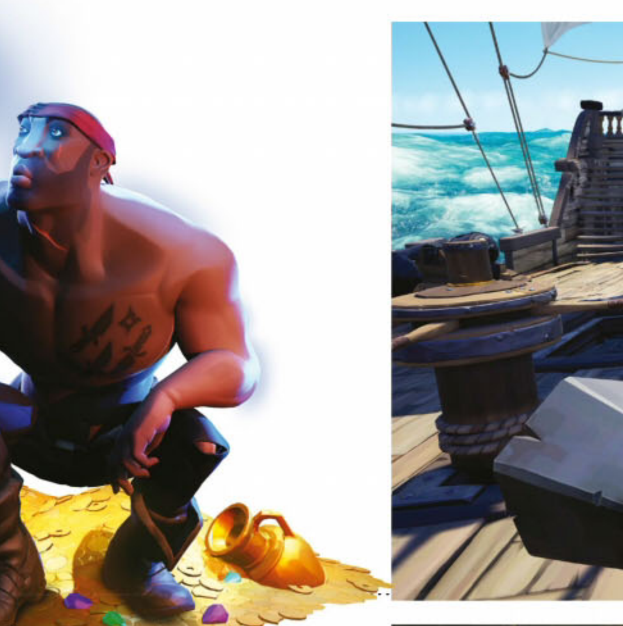
■ *Star Citizen* is a gargantuan game whose development has been rather muddled and complex, not least because it's revealing so much to its backers and fans as and when it gets completed. Developing in the open can be hard.



■ Above: Michel Ancel is putting something together with *Beyond Good & Evil 2* that far exceeds our wildest expectations of what he would target for this series. Right now it appears to be a marriage of third-person action, GTA sandbox and inter-planetary exploration.

■ Below: No word on whether or not *BG&E2* will feature any multiplayer functionality, but some sort of co-op seems like a good bet, if only to make sure the game has something to come back to and keep playing as the weeks and months pass.





XBOX DELIGHTS

CAN MICROSOFT PROVE THAT IT HAS MORE TO OFFER?

SEA OF THIEVES
Xbox One, PC
Rare
Q1 2018

ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS
Xbox One, PC
Moon Studios
TBC 2018

STATE OF DECAY 2
Xbox One, PC
Undead Labs
Q1 2018

THERE'S AN ESTABLISHED NARRATIVE AND MICROSOFT IS STRUGGLING TO SHAKE IT LOOSE. The company is settling into its newfound position of power confidently; for the first time in four years it is able to accurately claim that it has the most powerful home console on the market, and it has built an insanely player-focused, player-positive infrastructure around it. But Xbox doesn't have any games, right? That's the perception Microsoft can't seem to escape, and it'll be looking towards these three key 2018 releases to help turn potential players away from that particular talking point and into its embrace.

***Sea Of Thieves* [1]** is unquestionably Xbox's most important title going in to this new year. The adventure game – built around the core concept of engaging in piracy across a huge open world, on your own or with others by your side – is a potent blend of intuitive design and chaotic fun. *Sea Of Thieves* is one of those games that clicks the second you get your hands on it. Its pull isn't in the details but in the irresistible thrill that comes from engaging in a fantasy that has always been locked behind the boundaries of film, television and novels; an experience that manages to take a vast array of seemingly complex systems and ideas and successfully condenses them down into a form that is not only enjoyable to engage in, but actively encourages team work and experimentation as well.

Rare is back to its best, of that we're quite certain. The problem is, it needs people to play it – to trust in even the idea of it – for it to really come to life. We've heard the concerns and shared in them all the same – that this Xbox exclusive won't have the progression loop or content to engage for lengthy periods of time. But we can only balk at the suggestion, as *Sea Of Thieves* has proven to be a pure delight every time we've had the opportunity to play. Whether you're solo, with friends, or even with a group that doesn't have microphones, exploring new horizons and searching for treasure is always a blast. There's a certain satisfaction to getting *literally anything* done with a group that isn't in constant communication – some of the inventive ways players come up with to communicate in lieu of microphones has been proof of both the game's staying power and core allure.

> "RARE IS BACK TO ITS BEST, OF THAT WE'RE QUITE CERTAIN"

Where Microsoft is hoping to entrance the multiplayer, YouTube and Twitch communities with *Sea Of Thieves*, it has an equally exciting prospect lined up for single-player fans too. ***Ori And The Will Of The Wisps* [2]** might be quiet and considerate in its presentation, but it's unquestionably one of the most anticipated titles of the year. Moon Studios' 2015 debut *Ori And The Blind Forest* was a pure delight, proof that the Metroidvania genre still had room for improvement and expansion. For the sequel, we're going to be heading beyond the forest of Nibel and into uncharted territories. Expect heartbreak, expect stunning vistas and expect the game to feel wonderful to play. *Ori And The Blind Forest* received a lot of love for its look, style and story, but at the heart of the experience were some truly genre-defining gameplay mechanics and systems – that's something Moon is committed to, iterating heavily on the game's core fun and level design to create a truly must play experience.

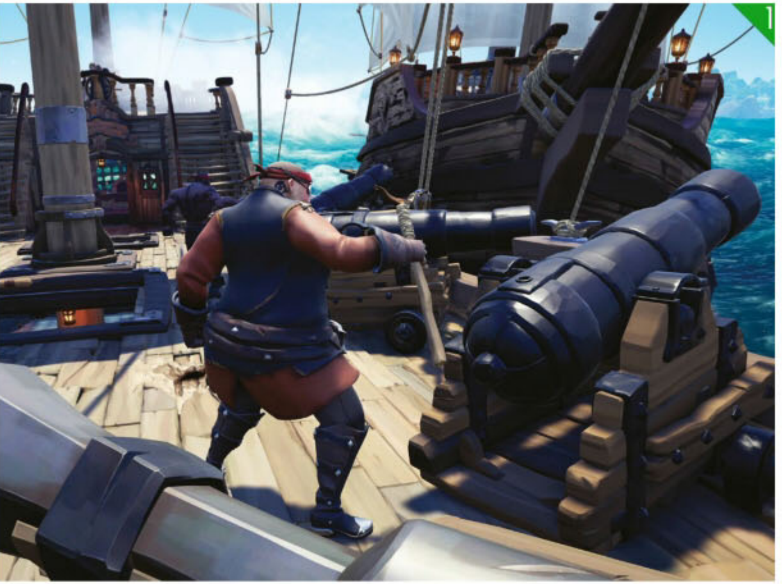
Microsoft also has something of a dark horse in its line-up for spring/summer 2018, that of ***State Of Decay 2* [3]**. Developer Undead Labs' 2013 sleeper hit – it sold more than 4.5 million copies, not that you'll hear many shouting about it – but it has proven to be a lot of fun over the years, a game that accurately reflects the horror and heartbreak regularly captured in shows such as *The Walking Dead*. So long as Undead Labs can tighten up some of the basics – more varied environments and better optimisation across the board would be fantastic to see – this should be a sequel that succeeds, with its deep group-survival mechanics and four-player co-op offering some respite from the unending bluster found elsewhere in the industry.





The exclusives are looking a little light at the moment, but we fully expect Microsoft to show up to E3 and the other summer conventions with a massive swathe of new announcements this year.









Sea Of Thieves is bloody good fun, reaffirming our faith in multiplayer gaming and the Xbox community at large.



Ori And The Will Of The Wisps is hugely anticipated thanks to the incredible success of its gorgeous and challenging predecessor.



Undead Labs is answering the call with *State Of Decay 2*, delivering an action-adventure with deep mechanics, spread across a group of survivors.

Above: With a brand new and massively powerful new console on the market the Xbox may well be able to coast through for the beginning of 2018 as the best place to play third-party titles in 4K.



MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD

WE SIT DOWN WITH CAPCOM TO FIND OUT HOW IT'S HOPING TO DOMINATE 2018 WITH ITS BIGGEST ACTION-RPG EVER

MONSTER HUNTER: WORLD
- PC, PS4, Xbox One
- Capcom
- 26 January 2018

FOR CAPCOM, THIS IS UNDOUBTEDLY THE MOST IMPORTANT MONSTER HUNTER RELEASE EVER. The series may have made its debut in 2004 – selling more than 40 million copies worldwide in that time – but there's still this perception that it can't find success in the West. Critical acclaim has done little to help in this regard, with the game's difficult learning curve, obtuse mechanics and systems, and glacial game pace often cited by consumers as reasons enough to approach with caution.

With *Monster Hunter: World* launching January 2018 on PlayStation 4 and Xbox One – not to mention on PC for the first time in the series' history – there's a larger potential player base out there than ever before. Capcom needs to get *World* right if it wants to impact Western markets and that all starts with a perception shift; the studio is making a number of integral changes for newcomers, whilst still trying to retain the heart that has made Monster Hunter so beloved to veteran hunters.

We've played enough of it over the last few months to know that Capcom is certainly heading in the right direction with its sprawling new edition featuring gorgeous open maps, seamless transitions between single-player and four-player co-op, and between varying ecosystems to allow for broader monster tracking experiences. *Monster Hunter: World* is going to be impressive, of that there is no question; we took the most pressing questions right to the people behind the polygons, getting their insight into how Capcom is planning on breaking down the barriers to play and make this the most important Monster Hunter game to date.

Despite Monster Hunter's huge success in Japan, it's still been something of a niche title in other territories. Why do you think this is, and how are you hoping to make *Monster Hunter: World* more accessible to Western players?

Ryozo Tsujimoto: Japan is quite a densely populated island country, where public transport usage is very common, so it was the perfect environment for a multiplayer portable game to take off in popularity. There seem to have been fewer opportunities like this in the West, which is probably why we've often had requests from Western players to bring Monster Hunter to home consoles – and, of course, there are Japanese players asking for the same thing!

This has lined up perfectly with our concept for *Monster Hunter: World*, which is to use the latest technology to portray the

> "WE'VE TRIED TO REDUCE FRUSTRATION IN EVERY AREA OF THE GAME TO ALLOW THE UNIQUE, SATISFYING HUNTING GAMEPLAY TO COME TO THE FORE AND SHINE"
> **YUYA TOKUDA** DIRECTOR


RYOZO TSUJIMOTO
Producer


YUKA TOKUDA
Director


KANAME FUJIOKA
Executive director & art director



Monster Hunter is launching for the very first time on PC with *World*, although it'll be missing the January launch date. Expect to see it drop later this summer when Capcom is done with optimisation.

world of Monster Hunter. We've essentially rebuilt the game from the ground up, so we were able to work on the finest of details. We have worked hard and utilised the know-how we've built up over years of making this series to ensure that, while we are making a game that more players than ever before can enjoy, we don't lose the essential core Monster Hunter DNA that makes the series what it is.

For example, regarding controls, some of the more unusual or unique controls you find in the game have perhaps been too difficult for new players in the past, such as holding R1 to run, while most action games these days use a stick click for this action. So we've added that option to keep in line with general industry standards, but at the same time we've kept the classic controls too so that veterans will feel comfortable as well.

Do you see this as something of a fresh start for Monster Hunter?
Tsujimoto: It's certainly a very important chapter in the ten-year-plus history of the series. As I mentioned, we've built up a lot of knowledge in that time and are using it in conjunction with the latest console tech to make the unique monsters and ecosystems of Monster Hunter more detailed and believable than ever. I think even 'veteran hunters' who've been with the series a long time will be blown away, and needless to say, for anyone for whom *World* is their first Monster Hunter game, it's going to be an amazing experience! We've certainly had both in mind as we've developed the game.

With *Monster Hunter: World* launching on PC, PS4 and Xbox One the potential player base is bigger than it has ever



UPDATED PLAY

The biggest changes coming to Monster Hunter: World

REFINED TRACKING



[1] While veteran players will still be able to get down in the dirt to track the hulking monsters that stalk the open maps, newer players will surely take delight in a more streamlined tracking experience. By finding a few points of interest (footprints, marks in the environment) the player is then able to mark the creature with Scout Flies that will lead you back to it at all times – no matter how hard it kicks your ass.

REWORKED WEAPONS



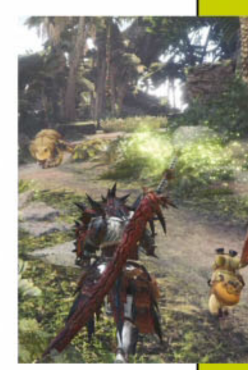
[2] While the 14 mainline weapon types from *Monster 4* and *Monster Hunter: Generations* will be making their way into *World*, each of them has been totally reworked. Capcom has gone out of its way to give each a more distinct feel and personality, helping shift into your personal play style, while the varying ammunition has been clarified and refined to be easier to parse. There will even be a host of new equipment introduced to further increase the scope of play for hunters both old and new.

DYNAMIC WORLDS



[3] The shift towards more open areas, and in being able to seamlessly cross through ecosystems and zones, means Capcom has had to put more personality into the environments – now they can be used as a weapon against your prey. Given the size of some of the monsters you'll be dealing with here, looking for ways to use the world as another weapon in your arsenal will be integral to make it through battles alive.

OVERHAULED CONTROLS



[4] Monster Hunter has always had a rather idiosyncratic control scheme, though perhaps that's putting it kindly. Capcom recognises that much of this no longer resonates with fans of modern action games or gamers in the West and that's why it has taken steps to modernise many of its core systems and control inputs. Fans of the old way can change the controls in the menus should they prefer, but new players will find this the easiest, most streamlined, Monster Hunter to date.







■ Above: While many of the somewhat convoluted control schemes have been cycled out, Capcom has ensured that these can be switched back should veteran players be more comfortable with the old way of doing things.



■ Below: Damage numbers have made their way to Monster Hunter and fans are split. Capcom is hoping that it'll make it easier (and ultimately more enjoyable) for people this way, now that they can easily track inflicted damage, though this too can be switched off.







HUNT, KILL, PROCEED

There's something special about the core game loop within Monster Hunter. Unlike most other action RPGs, your character doesn't have any specific or intrinsic abilities – nor will they earn any through progression or stat-allocation. Instead, it's the 14 weapon types and the various equipment that you can select that denotes play style and proficiency. Weapons will change the way you can track and combat the monsters, while armour will need to be mixed and matched to provide beneficial bonuses and survivability.

Of course, acquiring all of this is easier said than done. *World* features a light in-game economy; a few items of interest can be purchased, but much of the best loot will be found through trapping and killing monsters, completing quests and journeying out into the wilds with three other friends by your side. It's a lot of fun once you get into the rhythm of it; tracking specific monsters that you think you can topple in the open world, earning the correct crafting materials after defeating them and strategically creating the right items to allow you to hunt bigger and meaner prey. There isn't anything quite like it.

been. What were your priorities when it came to designing *World* for this new audience?

Tsujimoto: Although the PC version will be coming after the console release, it's our biggest release ever, for sure; we've kept that in mind when developing the game, as it means we will have a large number of first-timers joining the hunt. As an action game, the most important thing is the satisfying feeling players get as they pull off moves, and then the feeling of achievement when they clear a quest. I felt that we also needed to make sure that we had great guidance and tutorials in place, as well as localising the game into more languages than ever before.

During development, we carried out several focus tests, where we got some great feedback. We analysed this and chose the areas we felt needed further adjustments implemented.

What kind of changes and improvements can we expect to see *Monster Hunter: World*?

Yuya Tokuda: There are too many changes and improvements to list! We've added voiced tutorials and adjusted controls and gameplay systems in ways that should let players get into the game a lot quicker. The Bowgun ranged weapon controls in particular have been completely rethought, and I think shooter players are going to be able to pick them up right away and have a blast.

In multiplayer we've made it more flexible by allowing for players to join someone who's already started a quest. If you're playing alone you also have the new option of sending up a SOS flare, which lets other players come to your aid, seamlessly transitioning your quest into multiplayer mode. There are many more examples but, overall, we've tried to reduce frustration in every area of the game to allow the unique, satisfying hunting gameplay to come to the fore and shine.

> "WE HAD TO NOT JUST LOOK AT WHICH PARTS OF THE GAME WERE A BARRIER TO ENTRY FOR NEW PLAYERS, BUT ALSO WHICH PARTS WERE MOST BELOVED BY EXISTING PLAYERS"
> **KANAME FUJIOKA** EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Have the biggest changes to Monster Hunter been structural (the addition of clearer tutorials, for example) or mechanical (new ways to combat, to track monsters and so on)?

Tokuda: Both have been changed substantially in accordance with the concept of this game. We've created a dense, living and breathing world where you can enjoy hunting action that utilises this believable environment. And we designed the gameplay so that anyone can do that.

Kaname Fujioka: For example, the fact that the environments are much denser and topographically complex makes them easier to get lost in. So we added a gameplay mechanic by which you search for monster tracks and use your Scout Flies to pick up their scent and find the monster. You always need to consider both sides of the game experience you want players to have and the learning they need to get them there.

What's your process for creating and testing new monsters before they are inserted into the game?

Fujioka: First of all, we decide what role the monster is going to play in the progression structure of the game. Is this a 'tutorial' monster who'll teach players something they're going to need to use later? Or maybe an action-focused monster you'll come across at a point in the game when we want to ramp the

■ *Monster Hunter: World* is Capcom's best opportunity to crack the Western market, offering an overhauled set of core mechanics and systems, revised gameplay and a sprawling open world to explore with your friends in co-op.

intensity up a bit? And to achieve those roles in the game, what kind of abilities and properties will we give the monster? In addition, we look at the overall balance between new monsters and ones that are returning from previous titles, so that the roster feels well balanced.

Once we have this structure in mind we'll consider the shape and skeleton that we want a monster to have, and design it with the desired features in mind. Once finalised, that design is the basis for modelling, animation and so on. Once implemented in the game, we check to see if it fits in the game as we intended and if it's looking like the kind of monster we wanted it to be – whether each monster's individual personality and role comes across during gameplay is a very important point.

Finally, we balance the monster according to the design of the maps it appears on, and against all the weapons and armour in the game, to let it fit into the game as a whole while maintaining its uniqueness.

Combat and navigation are better than ever before! How long have these changes been in the works and what are you most excited to see players get their hands on?

Tokuda: We've evolved the action over the course of the series with each title, based on each one's concept and the hardware it was released for. The concept for *World* – creating a living, breathing environment with an ecosystem you can use as you hunt monsters – is what I've wanted to make since I joined Capcom 13 years ago.

There are many things I'm excited for players to enjoy, as there are many ways to play the game, but for me, strategically pitting two monsters against each other to my advantage is one of the most exciting things in the game!

A number of new additions and changes – from the introduction of damage numbers to more streamlined controls – seem to be aimed at courting new Monster Hunter players, but was there any worry that this could push away series veterans?

Tokuda: I can't say we didn't have any concerns about the damage display, but when we tested it out with players we found that even the veterans found them useful in deciding which parts to aim for, or which Bowgun ammo was the best choice. So when it comes to new features or changes like streamlined controls, we choose which ones to add not just based on how newcomers will find them, but whether they can bring something that are not just there for newcomers necessarily, but also whether they are useful and beneficial for everyone. I feel that damage numbers definitely adds quality, but I know that some series veterans will not want them, so I made sure we also included the option to remove them if you like.

Is it a challenge to balance the game's huge legacy against the need to bring new players into the experience?

Tokuda: It is. Given the uniqueness and specificity of the game's controls and gameplay, that was a difficult task.

Fujioka: We had to not just look at which parts of the game were a barrier to entry for new players, but also which parts were most beloved by existing players.

Tokuda: Fortunately, the team was made up of not just Monster Hunter series fans but also people who love Western games, so I believed we had the background to let us achieve this balance. During the course of development we held focus tests in the West and also showed the game at events around the world, where we got really great, positive feedback from players. That in turn gave us the confidence to push forward and make the finished game as great as we could.

Monster Hunter has always sought to make each of its maps its own compact ecosystem, has the transition to an open world affected the depth and nuance of the environments?

Tokuda: One of the most important things I wanted to include in this game was letting the player and monster actions have an effect on the game world, and to do this the loading areas between zones of the map had to be removed to make each one a singular, seamless ecosystem. This meant we had to think about the level design from two different sides: where the strongest monster in the map would make its nest, where it would go to feed and how the player would come across them and what kind of geography is best suited to this map? For example, if there are bodies of water in the map, where are they sourced and what kind of landscape would there be around them? Our level designers and artists had to have deeper discussions than before, and they even sometimes made clay models of the maps in order to better understand their structure.

Do you think this is Capcom's best chance at cracking the Western market with Monster Hunter?

Tsujimoto: I don't know if this is the best chance, but it's great timing. I'm just looking forward to everyone around the world finally getting their hands on the game and seeing what they think about it. I have confidence in this being a great game, and I'm hoping that the community of monster hunters will explode in 2018!



2018'S ODDITIES

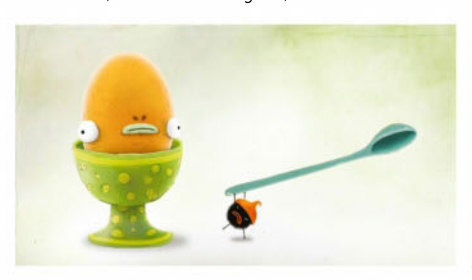
BIZARRE GAMES THAT HAVE CAUGHT OUR ATTENTION…



CHUCHEL

■ PC, Mac, Android, iOS | ■ Amanita Design | ■ Q1 2018

[1] If you've ever played weird, slightly creepy point-and-click Samorost adventures, you'll know what to expect from *Chuchel*, which is by the same studio. It's equally confusing and weird, but it's also strangely cute. A host of strange-looking characters accompany our hero Chuchel on his quest to get cherries – it's like an entire game about the squirrel from *Ice Age*, but way, way more interesting. There's a nonsensical humour running through *Chuchel* that makes it incredibly hard not to love, even if it occasionally borders on a *Minions* level of absurdity. *Samorost 1*, *2* and *3* were all great, so this will be too.





UNTITLED GOOSE GAME

■ TBC | ■ House House | ■ TBC 2018

[2] *Untitled Goose Game*, or "Horrible Goose" as most people have been calling it, is a sort of re-imagining of Metal Gear Solid where Snake is a goose, and instead of shooting people and dropping their bodies down wells, you're just running around being a bit of a tit. There's a farmer, you see, and you want his keys – so you sneak up behind him and grab them with your little goose beak. We're not sure what else this game offers just yet, as it's a long way off release, but you get to be a goose, so who cares?





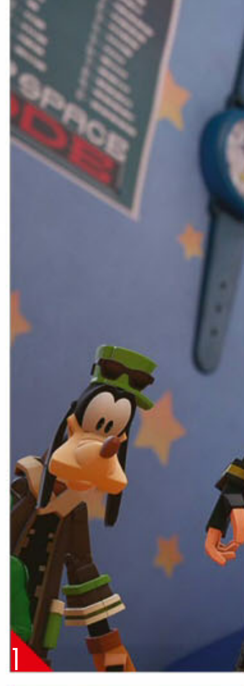
MORPHIES LAW

■ Nintendo Switch, PC | ■ Cosmoscope | ■ Q1 2018

[3] The idea behind multiplayer shooter *Morphies Law* is brilliant: every time you shoot someone, you steal mass from the body part you shot. The goal is to steal the most mass. If you get bigger legs, you can travel faster and jump higher; if you get a smaller body (by being shot a lot), you can fit through tiny spaces. The worse you are at the game, the harder you are to shoot! *Overwatch* is great, but *Morphies Law* lets you have a gigantic, planet-sized butt, so what's your REAL priority? Ours is butt.







JAPAN REVIVAL

THE JRPG IS BACK IN A BIG WAY

KINGDOM HEARTS III
■ PS4, Xbox One
■ Square Enix
■ TBC 2018

NI NO KUNI II: REVENANT KINGDOM
■ PC, PS4
■ Level-5
■ 19 January 2018

LOST SPHEAR
■ PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One
■ Tokyo RPG Factory
■ 23 January 2018

CODE VEIN
■ PC, PS4, Xbox One
■ Bandai Namco Studios
■ TBC 2018

SECRET OF MANA
■ PC, PS4
■ Square Enix
■ 15 February 2018

LEFT ALIVE
■ PC, PS4
■ Square Enix
■ TBC 2018

2017 WAS SOMETHING OF A MARQUEE YEAR FOR JAPANESE GAME DEVELOPMENT. Nintendo killed it, launching the Nintendo Switch to great success across the globe and delighting players with the likes of *The Legend Of Zelda: Breath Of The Wild*, *Super Mario Odyssey*, *Splatoon 2* and *ARMS*. We were also treated to the likes of *Resident Evil VII: Biohazard*, *Persona 5* and *Nier: Automata*, proving without doubt that the East is still capable of commanding a notable presence in an industry that had continued to feel as if it were skewing to the demands of (a very vocal) Western audience. Can the same be done in 2018?

While this year doesn't look quite as strong for the region there are a few games that are demanding attention. ***Kingdom Hearts III* [1]** is no doubt the biggest of them; it may be the twelfth instalment in the series, but this highly anticipated sequel is arriving some 12 years after the release of *Kingdom Hearts II* and people are excited to continue Sora's journey and close out the Dark Seeker saga. Delays have kept it at arms length for so long now – the game was confirmed back in 2013 – thanks in part to the switch to Unreal Engine 4 (from Square Enix's in-house Luminous Engine) a year into development, not to mention a change in the scope and allocated resources of the project.

What that now means is that *Kingdom Hearts III* is coming together as the biggest and most expansive game in the series to date, with the development team at Square Enix Business Division 3 making full use of the extra power afforded to them by the PS4 and Xbox One systems – no doubt a welcomed change of pace after so many years of working to handheld specifications. The biggest change is the Attraction Flow system, in which powerful new moves can be summoned that incorporate various Disney Park attractions, and these are as massive and as ridiculous as you could expect.

Square has also promised that a litany of new enemy types, summons, traversal types, keyblade transformations and team-up attacks will make it into the game, all of which are designed to tie into the all-new Disney worlds that'll be making an appearance. In fact, most of the worlds appearing are new to the Kingdom Hearts series, such as those framed around *Toy Story*, *Big Hero 6* and *Tangled* – there's still no word on whether Star Wars will be making the transition (although if we were to hazard a guess, and we absolutely will be, we'd imagine that the arrival of Luke Skywalker might push this ridiculous concept *too far*).

> "KINGDOM HEARTS III MAY NOT HAVE A RELEASE DATE PINNED DOWN JUST YET, ALTHOUGH THE COMPANY HAS CONFIRMED THAT IT WILL ARRIVE IN 2018"

While *Kingdom Hearts III* may not have a release date pinned down just yet – although the company has confirmed that it will arrive in 2018 – one JRPG that we know we'll be spending time on early this year is ***Ni No Kuni II: Revenant Kingdom* [2]**. Scheduled to release in January, the verdict is still out on whether Level-5 will be able to find success here; *Revenant Kingdom* has not, unlike its predecessor, been made in partnership with Studio Ghibli – the animation house's influence could be seen in everything from the character and world designs, to the march of the monsters and overall artistic style. That isn't Level-5's fault, Studio Ghibli has essentially been on hiatus since the release of Hayao Miyazaki's *The Wind Rises*, but there's no doubting that the development studio is up against it to make this work.

It's trying to do so by completely overhauling the combat design to allow for more fluid real-time battles, updating the character designs to allow for a more 'adult' story and changing the world map to introduce light strategy elements. *Revenant Kingdom* looks interesting, deep and fun – everything you'd want from a JRPG – but it doesn't necessarily look like *Ni No Kuni*, at least the one we fell in love with. Still, with the dust just about settling on 2017's incredible RPGs from Japan, we are certainly excited to know that more are on the way. Whether they can reach their incredible heights remains to be seen, but we sure as all hell can't wait to find out!







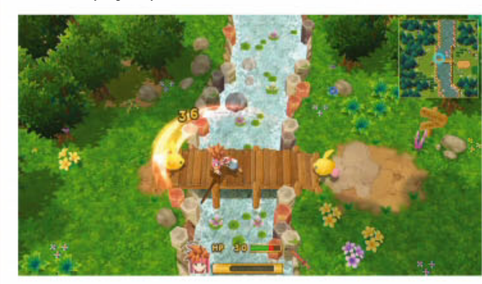
■ *Kingdom Hearts III* will arrive late in 2018, which means if you start researching the crazy history and story of the game now you might just be done by the time the game lands in your hands.

2

■ Above: Level-5 has overhauled so much of Ni No Kuni for this sequel that we're very interested to see whether it is able to retain the original's unique charm and spirit.

GOING NICHE

The titles vying for your attention



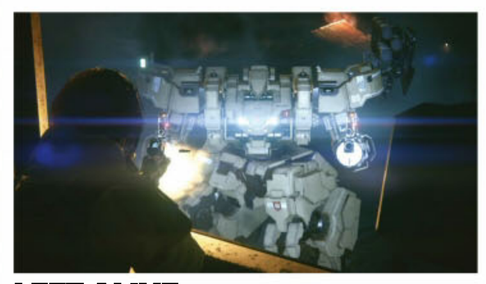
SECRET OF MANA

Celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, Square Enix has ordered a full remake of *Secret Of Mana*. It's odd, given that the original featured on the SNES Mini, reminding all that it has lost none of its charm or wonder in the intervening years. Why then Square Enix has decided to change some of the fundamentals remains a big question; the mesmerising graphical presentation has been scrapped in favour of a faux-3D chibi-style, and it's certainly lost some of its appeal in that translation. Still, given that there are no mechanical changes coming to *Secret Of Mana* it's still going to be the same amazing RPG behind the new visuals.



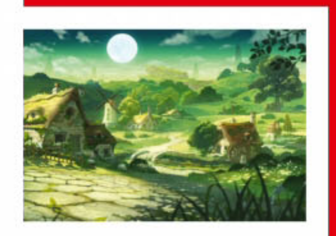
CODE VEIN

It shouldn't take long to make you understand what *Code Vein* is all about. Bandai Namco is essentially creating an anime *Dark Souls* here. That isn't meant to be disparaging, the studio is leaning into it. The rhythm of its play is so closely matched to that of its inspiration that it's almost impressive – a total deconstruction of the timing and pacing that makes the Souls games tick. Given the hyperactive art style, *Code Vein* is retaining just enough of its own sense of identity throughout this process too, distancing itself from the likes of *The Surge* or *Lords Of The Fallen* in this respect.



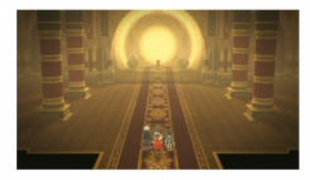
LEFT ALIVE

Reportedly set in the world of Square Enix's Front Mission franchise, *Left Alive* is one of 2018's most interesting prospects. While the small amount of footage we've seen so far seems to skew heavily in favour of action outside of the game's wanzers, we trust that this all-star development team will be able to deliver some high-octane mecha action. That includes director Toshifumi Nabeshima, (Armored Core), artist Yoji Shinkawa (Metal Gear, Zone Of The Enders), designer Takayuki Yanase (*Mobile Suit Gundam 00, Xenoblade Chronicles X*) and producer Shinji Hashimoto (*Front Mission* and *Front Mission Evolved*); we're excited to see what Square Enix will be able to deliver here.



LOST SPHEAR

Square Enix is trying to revitalise the classic JRPG for a new generation of gamers. With the release of *I Am Setsuna* in 2016, the company looked to re-create the wonder and beauty of its most popular 16-bit RPGs, impressing as it leant heavily on the themes and style of *Chrono Trigger*. With *Lost Sphear*, Tokyo RPG Factory is at it again; this is a story-driven adventure at its heart, although fans of the classics will be happy to see a tight ATB combat system included too – iterated upon from the glory days to allow for more strategic freedom and movement when in battle. What's great about *Lost Sphear* isn't merely that it's tapping into nostalgia, but that it's attempting to update the classic style. This feels like a retro game made for a modern audience, which is perhaps the best praise we could lay at its feet.













IN CONVERSATION WITH SQUARE ENIX PRESIDENT, YOSUKE MATSUDA

HOW DID THE TOKYO RPG FACTORY COME TOGETHER?

I discussed [the idea] with a number of people within the company and outside of the company too, the idea of creating new games in a classic style, the classic RPG style. Once we put the word out, a number of people raised their hands and said that they wanted to be involved in that kind of project – people within Square Enix and people from other companies as well. It was a case of gathering those people together: that was really the starting point of the Tokyo RPG Factory.

THE STUDIO'S DEBUT, *I AM SETSUNA*, AND NOW *LOST SPHEAR*, ARE BOTH HEAVILY INSPIRED BY *CHRONO TRIGGER*; WHAT WAS IT ABOUT THAT TITLE THAT RESONATED WITH YOU AND THE TEAM?

I didn't personally make that decision myself [laughter]. I know they all discussed it among themselves and they decided that they wanted to go in that *Chrono Trigger*-like direction. So I just said, 'yeah that's fine, give it a try!'

But I told them we couldn't just re-create the games from the past; it has to be made as a modern game for now. We've been saying that from the start, it was important that we went in that direction. I personally don't think the idea of a turn-based game is old-fashioned or outdated at all, I just think it's one style of game that you can have. It's like in music, you can have many different styles of music but any of them can be made modern.

WAS THE IDEA TO ALWAYS CREATE NEW IP, OR WERE YOU EVER TEMPTED TO BRING CLASSIC FRANCHISES BACK UNDER THE TOKYO RPG FACTORY BANNER?

What I really wanted Tokyo RPG Factory to do was to start to create new games, using a unique style and what [the team] is really good at doing is to make new IP – we firmly decided that at the start. But obviously the idea of some of the older RPGs that we used to create, back in the Super Nintendo days, the idea of bringing them back to a modern audience in some way is also something that we are looking into separately outside of RPG Factory. I think it'll be the mainline Square Enix studios that focus on that one.

HOW DOES TOKYO RPG FACTORY FIT INTO THE WIDER BUSINESS?

The way I look at it, I really want to have a lot of separate studios each with their own character, their own personality and their own specialisation. Rather than looking at Square Enix as one big structure, and how RPG Factory fits into that, I want to have lots of different studios; RPG Factory is obviously one of those, but we also have Crystal Dynamics, Eidos Montreal, Eidos London Studio… I want them all to have their own specific character and make different things in their own ways.

IS IT IMPORTANT TO HAVE SMALLER, MORE AGILE PROJECTS IN THE MARKETPLACE TO COMBAT THE RISK ASSOCIATED WITH TRIPLE-A DEVELOPMENT?

We have this large portfolio with lots of different games in there, and different teams will be good at different scales of development – some of them big and some of them better at smaller development. It's good to have those big productions, those big budget games, but it's good to give a chance to those developers who are maybe better at smaller scale projects – to have that richness and variation in our portfolio, I think that's a big strength for a game company.

***LOST SPHEAR* IS COMING OFF THE BACK OF *I AM SETSUNA*, WHAT DID YOU MAKE OF THE RESPONSE TO IT?**

This is a genre that everybody has their own opinion on; everybody has a little thing that they want to say on it, and we had a lot of people that really supported the idea and people that were very critical too, we got all of it. It'll be the same for *Lost Sphear*; you have to take all opinions on board, look at them, and work to make a new game and improve yourself on the next one. I think that's how you evolve games and keep making them better, by getting feedback from both sides.

HOW DO YOU SEE THE HEALTH OF THE JAPANESE GAMES INDUSTRY; WHAT TRENDS ARE YOU TRACKING AND HOW DO YOU SEE THEM IMPACTING THE INDUSTRY IN THE COMING MONTHS?

In the Japanese industry, certainly at the moment, we see that mobile games are getting very big. A lot of people are suggesting that there is a problem there – and that maybe they are in for a fall soon – but I think the current state of mobile games is looking very good for Japan.

Certainly one thing we do see with the games industry now is that there is a much broader demographic range, different generations of gamers; we see young kids playing games up to people that are my age, as well as the people in the middle. Originally you'd have a certain generation of people that would play games in one way, and then they would move up to the next generation and it would work like that, but now you have all of these generations playing together in their own ways and I think that's a very important change.

A lot of people try to pit the idea of console games versus mobile games against each other but I don't really think that is the situation at all. It's about having the variation of all of the different generations playing in their own way on

■ *Lost Sphear* is coming off the back of *I Am Setsuna*, Tokyo RPG Factory's attempt to recreate the magic, style and spirit of the 16-bit RPGs that Square built its reputation and success from. *Chrono Trigger* fans will want to pay attention.





the hardware that's for them. We want to continue making our games available to all of these people on all of the different platforms for them, to have that variety and breadth of experiences and I think that makes us stronger as a company.

I don't want to decide that *this* is how things should be, or that there is *one* model for everything, I want to be more flexible in that kind of thinking. I want to provide new and exciting experiences too. [With] the younger generation of gamers, there are a lot of games that came out before they were even born and they may not have any kind of contact with but they [see] these games as new and different experiences to what they are used to. In the same way, we have people in their forties and fifties who may not be so up to date with mobile games and they would be new and different experiences for them too.

HOW HAS THE RELEASE OF THE XBOX ONE X AND PS4 PRO IMPACTED CURRENT AND FUTURE PLANS?

In the past we've had that massive, very stark changeover for a completely new hardware generation and a completely new development environment – where you have to learn everything again from scratch. In that sense, having [a] smoother gradation and change has made our business and development much easier, because there is less to acclimatise to with longer generation cycles.

WHAT'S THE FOCUS FOR SQUARE ENIX IN THE NEXT BUSINESS YEAR?

Well, we're focussing on everything! If you look at the HD games line-up, most of the core titles in that line-up are going to be Western studio developed. We've also got *Kingdom Hearts III*…

WE OFTEN PITCH THE EAST VERSUS WEST, IS THAT NOW AN OUTDATED WAY OF VIEWING THE INDUSTRY?

I think fans generally might like to see it in those directions but I don't see it like that. Certainly nowadays, the speed at which information flows is just so fast, it really isn't what it was like in the past where you have a game developed in Japan, then half a year later it would finally get localised and finally come out elsewhere in the world. That's one of the reasons that it doesn't make sense to think about it in that regional sense anymore.

SO, YOU HAVE A MORE GLOBAL OUTLOOK ON THINGS?

We don't really think about it as working on specific regional markets, we generally think about it as the overall line-up of titles each year and what we are going to be able to put into that. The titles that are being developed by the Western studios are going to be a major part of the year, but that's not because we are aiming specifically for those regions. Look at games like *Nier: Automata* [which was released earlier in 2017], a Japanese developed game that sold globally, so we really don't try to focus on those as individual regions – we look at it as a global line-up for a global audience.

WITH THE RELEASE OF *LOST SPHEAR* IMMINENT, WHAT ARE YOUR ASPIRATIONS FOR ITS RELEASE AND IMPACT?

What I'd like to see is as many people as possible try *Lost Sphear* and just experience it. It's a completely different kind of game experience to what you get with the regular, mainstream triple-A titles, it's a different thing – a great experience in its own right. I hope it gets more people interested in that genre of games, especially the younger generation, [so they] realise that there is another style of game that they can enjoy.

2018'S BIGGEST SHOOTERS

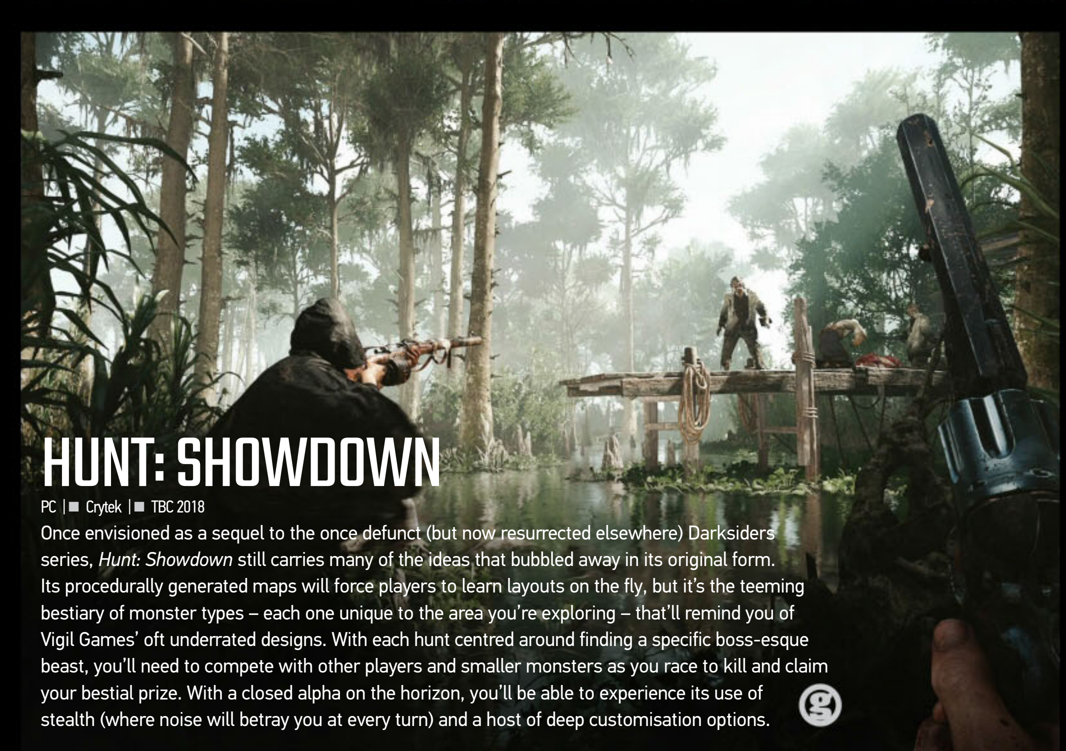
THE GUN-TOTING INNOVATORS GETTING OUR ATTENTION THIS YEAR...



METRO EXODUS

■ PS4, Xbox One, PC | ■ 4A Games | ■ TBC 2018

Bar a two-for-one re-release in 2014, things had been super quiet on the Metro news front. That was until the surprise reveal, at E3 2017, of a semi open-world third instalment. With its atmospheric underground setting, mutated enemies and post-apocalyptic melancholia, the series has made its name by splicing horror chills with traditional shooter mechanics. That makes the prospect of heading into larger locales (4A has confirmed *Exodus* won't be open world, but will have sandbox environments) – with the ability to approach monsters and hostile survivors from multiple angles and the power to craft weapons – an exciting one for 2018. Don't worry, there will still be plenty of dark, claustrophobic moments, but exploring the Ural Mountains could prove a welcome breath of slightly irradiated air.



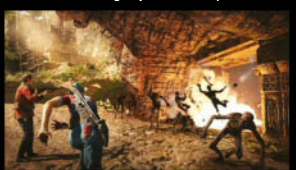
HUNT: SHOWDOWN

PC | ■ Crytek | ■ TBC 2018

Once envisioned as a sequel to the once defunct (but now resurrected elsewhere) Darksiders series, *Hunt: Showdown* still carries many of the ideas that bubbled away in its original form. Its procedurally generated maps will force players to learn layouts on the fly, but it's the teeming bestiary of monster types – each one unique to the area you're exploring – that'll remind you of Vigil Games' oft underrated designs. With each hunt centred around finding a specific boss-esque beast, you'll need to compete with other players and smaller monsters as you race to kill and claim your bestial prize. With a closed alpha on the horizon, you'll be able to experience its use of stealth (where noise will betray you at every turn) and a host of deep customisation options.

MORE TO WATCH

Another four to get you fired-up...



STRANGE BRIGADE

■ Xbox One, PC, PS4
■ Rebellion Developments | ■ TBC 2018

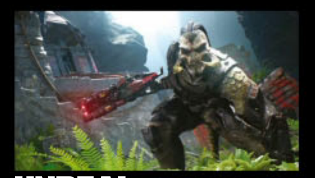
Taking the core physics of its paced yet brutal Sniper Elite series, Rebellion dials back the clock to the 1930s, adds four-player co-op and an army of monsters. With barmy weapons, B-movie themed levels and a big focus on teamwork, *Strange Brigade* is 2018's dark horse.



QUAKE CHAMPIONS

■ PC | ■ id Software, Saber Interactive
■ Early Access (out now), full release (TBC 2018)

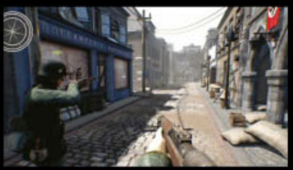
Quake Champions might not be finished yet, but that hasn't stopped it from rocket jumping right back into our hearts thanks to its arrival on Steam Early Access. Expect the full release to feature the lightning fast, blood drenched anarchy that made Quake what it is today.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT

■ PC | ■ Epic Games | ■ 2018

Much like fellow returning shooter *Quake Champions*, UT will be reborn on PC with a modern Unreal Engine 4-powered makeover that taps into the brutal simplicity that made the original game so timeless. Its imminent return means 2018 will be the year of the arena shooter.



BATTALION 1944

■ PS4, PC, Xbox One
■ Bulkhead Interactive | ■ TBC 2018

Once successfully Kickstarted – and now under the Square Enix banner – this indie gem marches to WW2 with a multiplayer-focused offering that strips out the advantageous nature of perks and offers a twitch shooter that rewards skill rather than killstreaks.



FUN INNOVATORS

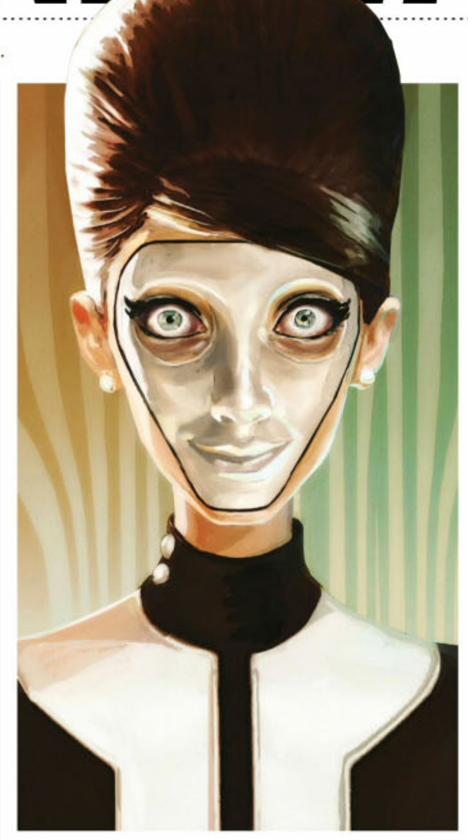
AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT...



HARRY POTTER: WIZARDS UNITE

■ Mobile | ■ Niantic | ■ 2018

[1] *Pokémon Go* proved itself to be a genuine phenomenon, quickly establishing itself as one of the biggest games in existence. Developer Niantic is partnering up with Warner Bros. for its next social experiment, *Harry Potter: Wizards Unite*. Expect to explore your local neighbourhoods to discover hidden artefacts, learn to cast spells with your friends and encounter legendary beasts while out in the wild. This will be the game to ensure that the only muggles in this world are the people without a smartphone.





STARLINK: BATTLE FOR ATLAS

■ PS4, Switch, Xbox One | ■ Ubisoft Toronto | ■ 2018

[2] Toys-to-life might be in pretty bad shape, but *Starlink: Battle For Atlas* looks to be one of the more interesting experimentations of the form. A science-fiction fuelled action-adventure game in which players are able to wholly customise the configuration of their ship on the fly, with experimentation actively encouraged as you look to push through and stabilise sectors of the Atlas system. *Starlink* is driven by impressive technology and looks a lot of fun, but only time will tell if there's still any draw left in toys-to-life.



LIGHT FINGERS

■ Nintendo Switch | ■ Numizmatic Games | ■ 2018

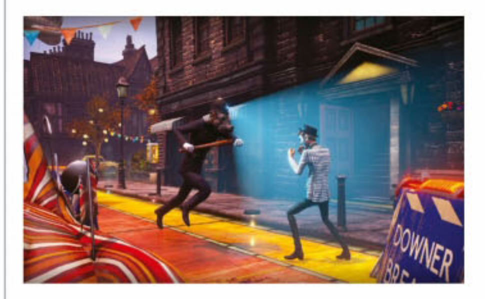
[3] Designed to take advantage of the Nintendo Switch's inherent capacity for pick-up-and-play action, *Light Fingers* is a rowdy multiplayer game designed to test your reflexes and cunning. *Light Fingers* is a mini-game set in a larger fantasy world, the sort of fantasy game that thieves involve themselves in at a local tavern after a night of piracy. The action unfolds (quite literally) across a detailed miniature world that expands as players continue to take their turns. It's looking great and, most importantly, it's looking *fun*.



FLOOR KIDS

■ Nintendo Switch | ■ MERJ Media | ■ Q1 2018

[4] *Floor Kids* is one of those titles that makes us so damned happy to be Nintendo Switch owners. This is a rather unique breakdance game that pushes you to match killer beats with freestyle dance moves, all of it built on the foundation of intuitive control designed to give you the freedom to play the way that you want to. Rhythm action to the fresh sounds of DJ Kid Koala, cast in absolutely adorable hand-drawn animation. Check it, for sure.



WE HAPPY FEW

■ PC, Xbox One | ■ Compulsion Games | ■ 12 April 2018

[5] Compulsion Games may have gone a little quiet since launching *We Happy Few* into Early Access/Game Preview on PC and Xbox One in 2016, but that's because the team is focused on getting this unique survival and exploration game *just right*. The game has been steadily improving, with the core-replay loop – of you pushing to escape a world gone mad on hallucinogenics – only getting more enticing and exciting as the months have passed. Keep your eyes on this one; there's more to it than a lovely art style.

IS IT TIME FOR A NEW GENERATION?

THE MID-CYCLE CONSOLES HAVEN'T SEEN A PHASE SHIFT IN GAMES – COULD A NEW GENERATION BE THE SOLUTION?

WE'VE FOUND OURSELVES WONDERING WHAT MORE THERE IS TO COME FROM THIS GENERATION. With releases starting to hit the theoretical limits of what the stock PS4 and Xbox One can pump out and the Pro/X versions edging ever-closer to being the 'ideal' edition of modern triple-A titles, there's definitely a reasonable argument in favour of hitting the reset button and starting afresh with a whole new generation. But is it too soon? And would a PS5 and Xbox Two *really* kickstart a new wave of innovation?

To the first question, it might feel too soon for a new console – but if we look at history, by the time Sony or Microsoft release their next consoles, it will be at least five years since this generation began. That's around the average lifespan of a console over the past few decades. So even though the Pro and X launches make it *feel* too soon, in the grand scheme of things, it's not that crazy. As to the second question – well, that's more difficult to quantify.

Below: Sony's initial slimming of a console was done at the latter stages of the original PlayStation's life cycle – the PSone wasn't upgraded in any way, but re-branded and pushed as a machine for younger gamers.

Would a new console with more capabilities – true 4K60 gaming, seamless online integration, improved social aspects – mean games would change fundamentally? Would it mean devs would be willing and able to take more creative risks? History shows that, actually, yes it would. Settling into a rhythm in a generation is a genuine concern with game development, with a rash of me-too titles brought out to try and capitalise on whatever's popular in the mainstream at the time. A new console means a new, limited audience craving any and all experiences. What this means is you have the likes of *Ryse*, *FantaVision* and *Kameo* launching with consoles; games we barely saw a peep from again, but ones that clearly came about thanks to the freedom to innovate that comes with a new generation.

There is, of course, the Nintendo factor to consider. The House of Mario operates in its own bubble, as demonstrated with the release of the Switch earlier in 2017. Rather than pursuing the greener pastures of 4K, Miyamoto and chums focused on portability, flexibility and variety of experience. What have we had in return? Two game of the year – nay, all time – contenders with *Breath Of The Wild* and *Mario Odyssey*, and one of the finest game machines ever created. Nintendo has rarely played into the arms race that Sony and Microsoft (and formerly Sega) whipped up and has repeatedly proven that its unique approach to both handheld and console releases often results in a successful machine and bona fide classic titles.

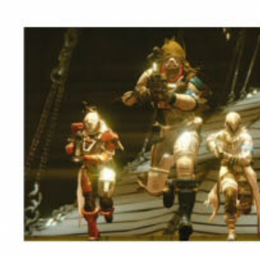
So we're left with Sony and Microsoft battling it out for checkerboard and upscaled supremacy, throwing around teraflops and acronyms without a care, encouraging developers to make games that push the original hardware to breaking point – while not allowing them to make anything that wouldn't work on those stock consoles. It makes sense – Pro and X owners only make up a small percentage of the overall audience – but devs are itching to push the more powerful machines further than they have been.

It's an impossible situation to be in, and one that could only be solved by either taking off the leash, thus disenfranchising a swathe of PS4 and Xbox One owners, or by firing the starting gun on a brand new generation, with every player – and developer – starting again from the same point.

Rather than risking the fragmentation of an audience, there's every chance that either one of Sony or Microsoft will want to hastily reset the generation once again, but with the wildcard of the 1.5 consoles introduced this generation, it's hard to believe that either company would pull the trigger so soon.



Above: Microsoft has gone in heavy trying to woo the enthusiast players with the Xbox One X – even more so than Sony, which seemingly adopted a less aggressive push to upgrade players to the PS4 Pro.





New console generations do see an uptick in innovation and experimentation, but is that enough to really demand a move to a whole new set of consoles from Microsoft and Sony?

STUCK IN THE MIDDLE

Mid-cycle upgrades – or just cosmetic tweaks – are nothing new



THE COMPUTERS

It's impossible to count PCs in this category, but home computers such as the C64, Spectrum and Amiga all saw mid-cycle upgrades to their hardware, positioning them differently in the market and tweaking their abilities accordingly. Those burned by the A500+ will not have fond memories of this approach, though.



MANY MEGA DRIVES

The original Mega Drive saw a cosmetic update in the shape of the smaller, less power-hungry (and stereo outputting) Mega Drive 2, but Sega also pushed out the MD/CD hybrid the Multi Mega, the handheld Nomad and, notoriously, the mid-cycle upgrade mushroom known as the 32X. None were a success.



NINTENDO'S HANDHELDS

An all-too-true joke goes around whenever a new Nintendo handheld launches: wait six months and buy the upgraded version instead. It isn't always six months precisely, but the truth behind the gag is all too plain – the Game Boy Advance SP, DS Lite and New 3DS are all testament to the fact.



THE SLIMS

The Mega Drive 2 and Nintendo's *first* SNES Mini (released in '97) were latterly joined by every PlayStation seeing a slimmed-down, re-worked console. And while it didn't play ball with the original console (though it did with the pad), Microsoft's Xbox line has also visited Slimming World a couple of times.



■ Naughty Dog's vision for The Last Of Us appears to be pretty fluid, and perhaps a little more open-ended than what we saw with Uncharted. What is certain is that this is Joel and Ellie's story to be told, so wherever it heads, they will be the focus.

THE ALLURE OF THE SHADOW DWELLERS

IT'S SOME OF 2018'S MOST MYSTERIOUS GAMES THAT HAVE US THE MOST EXCITED

CYBERPUNK 2077
PS4, Xbox One, PC
CD Projekt Red
Q4 2018

RED DEAD REDEMPTION II
PS4, Xbox One
Rockstar Studios
Q2 2018

THE LAST OF US: PART II
PS4
Naughty Dog
TBC 2018

THE UNKNOWN IS A WONDERFULLY ENTICING THING. It's that very notion that makes a preview special issue like this work, constantly looking forward to the future and casting our minds to what might be. And so it is that often the most exciting, scintillating upcoming releases are also the ones with the most closely guarded or little-revealed details. We could hardly know less, so we're desperate to know more. In this regard, three games stand out as particularly exciting and promising: ***The Last Of Us: Part II*** **[1]**, ***Red Dead Redemption II*** **[2]** and ***Cyberpunk 2077*** **[3]**.

Naughty Dog's sequel was recently voted the most-wanted game for 2018 at the Golden Joysticks, and we can tell you it wasn't even very close when the final tally came in. *The Last Of Us* was an extraordinarily potent, heart-wrenching and action-packed experience. It managed to walk the line between telling an emotional story while also giving you plenty of visceral, tactile engagement that drags you through the experience. It was heavyweight stuff, and Naughty Dog proved itself to be capable of carrying that burden very well indeed.

So, with *The Last Of Us: Part II*, what are we to expect? For a start, we know that Joel and Ellie remain at the heart of the story and experience, with Ellie taking the lead role this time. Set five years after the events of the first game, creative director Neil Druckmann has talked about this game being about hate in the same way as the original was about love. Ellie, now 19 years old, has had a few years to live and dwell on the events of the first game, perhaps even find out a few things about that experience that she didn't know before, and she is royally peeved.

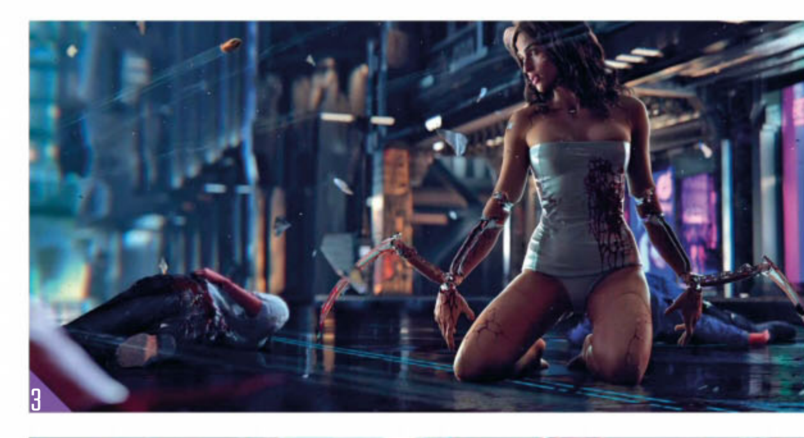
The little question marks that sit on this sequel structurally are where some of the rest of what's been revealed fits in to the whole, and why the game appears to have moved itself from Jackson County, Wyoming (where the last game ended), to Seattle, Washington on the western coast? That change in locale was something clue-hunters managed to piece together from pieces of concept art, and was only reinforced by the now-infamous Paris Games Week reveal and its introduction of some new characters – which brings us to the identity of those other characters.

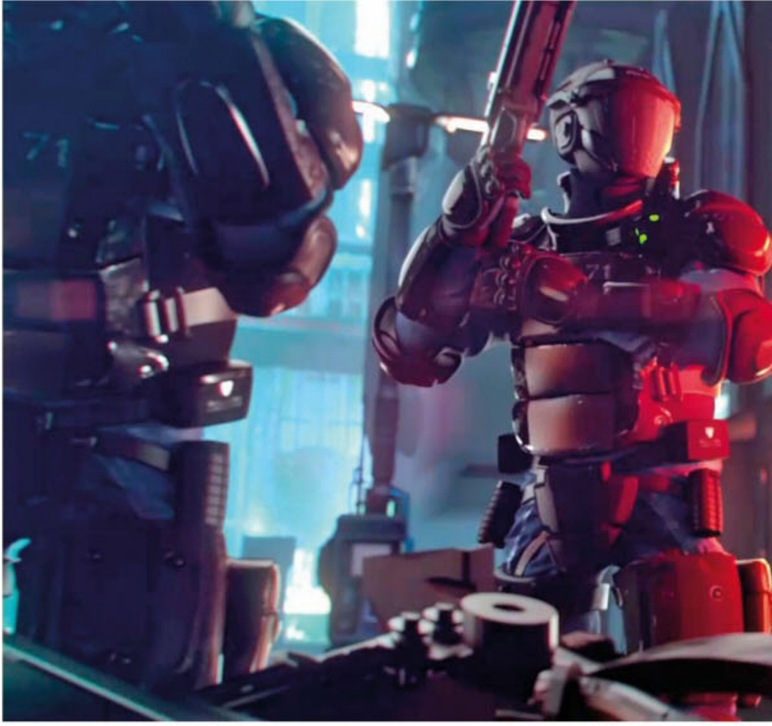
As you read this, it's entirely possible that Naughty Dog and Sony have shed some further light on these characters, their identities and their role in the game, but for now we're still in the dark. There has been plenty of speculation about the role of the unnamed woman played by Laura Bailey, about her possible connection to Ellie, about where in the timeline a religious cult could have taken hold in the North Western United States. All very curious questions that spin out into even more potential conflicts – which is ultimately why we love a teasing release for a game. This is how we get drawn in, and how a game can feed into an excitement loop. We might sometimes refer to it as hype, but when it's a game that connects to you, it means so much more than that. This slow build of anticipation and speculation is as much a part of the experience of a new release as playing it is. Allowing your mind to wander and to dream up possibilities doesn't necessarily diminish the final experience, so long as it's well made. Naughty Dog has proven rather good at providing us with just enough to get our mind racing and then delivering in style.

Perhaps most exciting right now as we await further story details is just how far *The Last Of Us: Part II* is pushing things technically. Naughty Dog's titles haven't exactly been slouches in the graphics department this generation, but it's implementing brand-new capture and rendering techniques for this release, making it the most realistic it has released on PS4. *Part II* will also be using a new and improved engine, which we got a glimpse of from the Paris trailer, and the detail of facial animation and environmental effects definitely seems to be improved on what was achieved in *Uncharted 4* and *The Lost Legacy*.

In some respects, Rockstar is from another school altogether when it comes to teasing a new game. Unlike Naughty Dog, where we get some follow-up quotes and perhaps even some interviews after a new teaser reveal, Rockstar remains stoic and silent. In part this is because it has immense and well-deserved confidence that people know and will be instantly excited by its mainline projects without needing to push them too hard. It's also because it knows that letting the fandom speculate and pick apart its trailers has become a part of the fun of these new games.

There has been plenty of speculation about whether or not Ellie's deceased mother, Anna, will play a role in this game, as well as whether Joel could be dead. Given the original game, we can't discount either of these possibilities. It's likely to get pretty dark.





Some of the confidence that Rockstar has in this approach dates back to the original *Things Will Be Different* trailer for *Grand Theft Auto IV*, released in early 2007. This teaser, which was only a little over a minute long, sent us into a spin. We picked apart every inch of it, every building it was referencing, every clue about the locations and what might happen there. Even its choice of music and the way it was cut together (an homage to documentary *Koyaanisqatsi*) became talking points. It's something we've seen happen all over again with *Red Dead Redemption II*.

We've picked over the trailers, trying to find an indication of when and where this new game will be set. Early speculation that it would be a prequel to *Redemption* has been confirmed, of course, as has the name of the new lead character (we hesitate to say hero under the circumstances), Arthur Morgan. Returning to the story of the Dutch van der Linde gang is interesting, delving into some of the rich history and dastardly behaviour that was hinted at and suggested in *Redemption*. As van der Linde's heavy, Morgan is going to be at the centre of this action, with the promise of heists and extortions aplenty.

The really enticing element of *Red Dead Redemption II* is the open world and the potential for stories to be made and teased out of the environment by our own behaviour. Rockstar is one of the masters of sandbox gameplay, and that means a living, breathing setting for us to experiment in and explore. With the current generation of consoles pushing it forward, that promises to be something very exciting indeed. And that's before we even get into the likelihood of a *GTA Online* style experience. Take Two, Rockstar's parent company, has been expressing its desire to keep pursuing micro-transactions in its games, and while such assertions tend to make us bristle a little, we can't help but be reminded that *GTA V* has been living on that model for some time now, and to great success both commercially and critically. A persistent multiplayer *Red Dead Online* makes a lot of sense to us.

One company that has made it clear it rejects the concept of loot boxes and micro-transactions is CD Projekt Red, a developer and publisher that has emerged as a champion of the gamer in recent years, helped in part by the fact it's made one of the best games of the generation: *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*. Its next title, *Cyberpunk 2077*, fits nicely into this conversation about little-revealed titles that have captured our imagination. In this instance it has a lot to do with the studio's pedigree and that this will be the first new game from the *Wild Hunt* team since it published those amazing DLC expansions to Geralt's story.





Returning to the Dutch van der Linde gang is an interesting choice, since it will reunite us with both heroes and villains from *Redemption*. What new insight might it offer into the relationships between all of these crooks?



Rockstar is playing its cards very close to the chest on this Red Dead sequel, but that's no great surprise. It knows that there's enough interest in the game without having to stoke the flames too much with core details of what to expect.

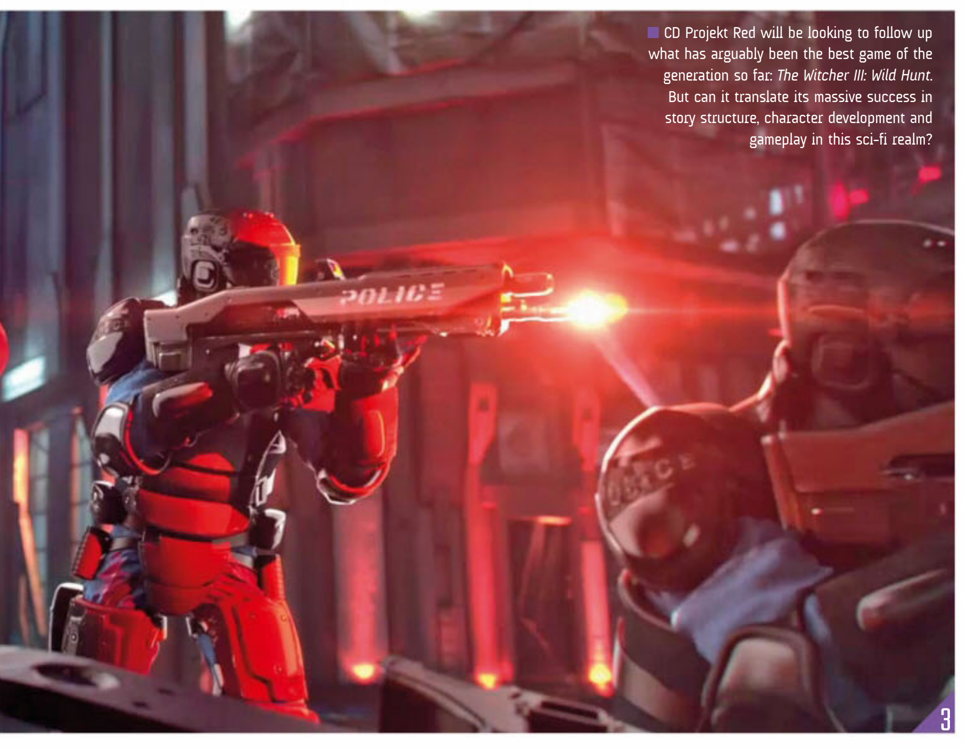






Cyberpunk 2077 benefits from being based on a pre-existing tabletop, pen and paper property, which means CD Projekt Red has plenty of established lore to work from. It is also working with the creator of the Cyberpunk game, Mike Pondsmith, to maintain its authenticity.





CD Projekt Red will be looking to follow up what has arguably been the best game of the generation so far: *The Witcher III: Wild Hunt*. But can it translate its massive success in story structure, character development and gameplay in this sci-fi realm?





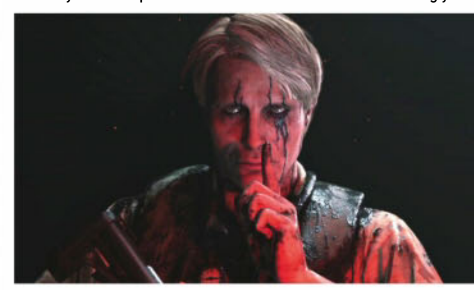
So, what do we really know about *Cyberpunk 2077*? Well, to some degree we know that as an RPG coming from the maker of *The Witcher* we will be getting a deep, well-crafted, role-playing experience that will likely not shy away from the darker sides of the human experience. In some respects it feels a little like the situation when BioWare moved from making fantasy, role-playing experiences to tackling sci-fi with *Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* and latterly *Mass Effect*. While the core mechanics might need to change to better reflect the technology and challenges this genre demands, the heart of the experience and approach to solving those challenges remains the same. As it happens, this game is based on the *Cyberpunk* pen and paper game from Mike Pondsmith (who is working with CD Projekt Red to translate the experience to game form as faithfully as possible).

This will likely facilitate one of the major differences we'll see between The Witcher and *Cyberpunk 2077*, as CD Projekt Red has committed to making a combat system that sits somewhere between traditional RPG real-time action and the tabletop experience of the original game. When it made that commitment early in development, it admitted it wasn't sure exactly how that would work, but the mission seems like a virtuous one to us. It may find some joy, for instance, in something similar to Dragon Age's mix of real-time and paused strategic combat.

But what really excites about this game is the promise of CD Projekt's vision for a sci-fi city, in this instance Night City from the original game. We know that the team is working with a new REDengine 4, which upgrades everything from the REDengine 3 that the previous Witcher game had used, so the epic skylines, murky alleys and neon-lit highstreets are likely to be breathtaking. And then there's the possibility of a multiplayer aspect, which the team assures us will not impact the single-player focus of the main game. Perhaps a little *Watch Dogs*-style hacking action or a little cyber co-op? We can only fantasise about such things for the time being, but then that's such a large part of the fun, isn't it?

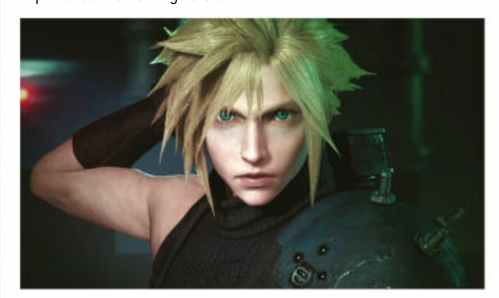
MORE MYSTERIOUS MARVELS

Games you can expect to hear a lot more about in the coming year



DEATH STRANDING

Kojima's wonderfully strange project has an all-star cast thanks to Mads Mikkelsen, Norman Reedus and Guillermo del Toro lending their likenesses and performances to the game. What exactly the three of them will be doing in this world of oozing black liquids, floating beings, dead sealife, babies in jars and equations for relativity etched-on pendants is a mystery we look forward to unravelling. What's been promised is an open-world action experience like nothing before.



FINAL FANTASY VII REMAKE

While a faithful re-creation of the 1997 original would have suited us just fine, director Tetsuya Nomura has more ambitious plans for this retelling of the story of Cloud Strife and friends. The headline grabber is that it won't feature a turn-based combat system like the original, offering real-time combat as well as stealth that allows you to avoid battles altogether. The thinking is that since the game can look more realistic, it doesn't need to rely on you filling in the gaps yourself.



METROID PRIME 4

While Samus's Switch debut will have a brand new team behind it, it's good to know that veteran producer Kensuke Tanabe will still be stewarding the process. In the past, Tanabe has teased that a sequel to the *Prime* series might look to incorporate a time-shifting mechanic, which would be an interesting new twist. Thinking about how classic Metroid gameplay might interplay with a time-displacement effect definitely gets us salivating, even bringing up examples like the A Crack In The Slab mission from *Dishonored 2*.



■ PlayStation VR has well and truly arrived, but don't expect the platform to rest on its laurels in 2018. The next 12 months will see a wealth of great new games land to keep those headsets firmly in front of your eyes.

WHAT NEXT FOR PSVR?

SONY'S VR HEADSET LOOKS TO BRING SOME FULLER EXPERIENCES TO THE FORMAT...

BLOOD & TRUTH

■ PSVR | ■ London Studios | ■ TBC 2018

[1] Coming from London Studios (yes, the same developer that gave us The Getaway series on PS2), *Blood & Truth* is another round of knee-slapping, cor-blimey-ing Cockney violence – only this time it's channelled through the witchcraft of VR. Building on its experience with the surprisingly fun *The London Heist*, the British outfit plonks you in the boots of a former special forces soldier who returns home to do battle with a gangster threatening his family. Okay, the story sounds like something out of a throwaway Chris Ryan novel, but with the promise of stealth (with silenced pistols, natch), full-on gunfights and more exploding Cockneys than a Guy Ritchie wet dream, we're fully on board with this VR romp aiming for triple-A status.

BOW TO BLOOD

■ PSVR | ■ Tribetoy | ■ TBC 2018

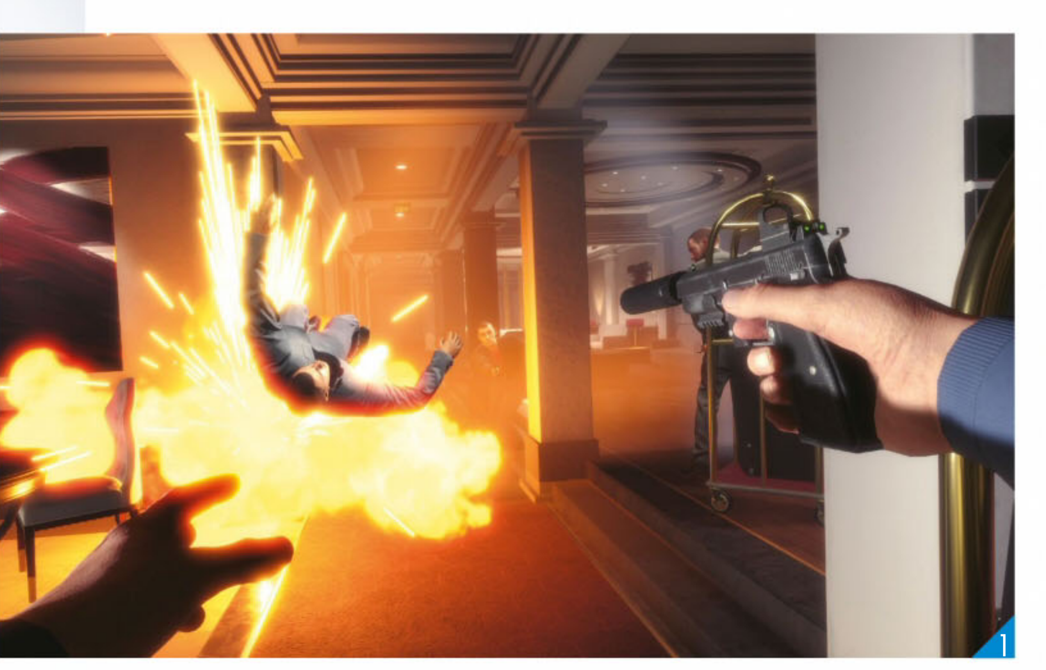
[2] Throwing you into an arena of airborne ships, pitting you in combat against vicious AI enemies and in races for supremacy, *Bow To Blood* is a bright, colourful and intense action experience that will likely have you squealing with delight from behind your VR headset. It's all procedurally generated too, meaning that every battle and arena will be a little different, keeping the challenge fresh at all times. From your first-person perspective you must command and pilot your ship, sent out drones to attack the enemy and make use of your pistal to shoot down incoming enemy turrets that want to shoot you out of the sky. We're loving the chunky art style on this one too and can't wait to see what the procedural generation teases from it.

STAR CHILD

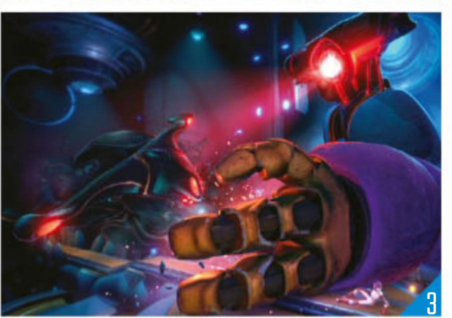
■ PSVR | ■ Playful Corp | ■ TBC 2018

[3] Debuted at E3 back in June and given a brand-spanking new trailer at Paris Game Week, *Star Child* is becoming one of the most intriguing new titles coming to Sony's VR platform. Intriguing because it's actually a 2.5D platformer that uses the immersive perspective of VR to draw you into its colourful sci-fi world while adding a new dimension of difficulty. Coming from *Super Lucky's Tale* developer Playful, you know you're going to get a charismatic slice of platforming action that's big on creative new ideas. As Spectra, a traveller stranded on a distant alien planet, you'll need to use a variety of unlockable abilities – such as the power to teleport – to stop a terrible force that wants to destroy the universe.















TRANSFERENCE

■ PSV4, HTC Vive, Oculus Rift | ■ SpectreVision | ■ Q1 2018

[4] Who knew that E3 2017 was going to serve up a new VR game starring and co-developed by Frodo Baggins himself? While it sounds like a long-running April Fool's Day prank, Elijah Wood and his film company SpectreVision really has teamed up with Ubisoft to create one of the most unique titles on the VR horizon. As a subject in an experiment that's using virtual reality to help users experience traumatic events, you'll start to lose track of what's real and what's fiction, leading to some pretty trippy moments. Sprinkling in a spot of time travel for good measure, *Transference* tackles subjects such as PTSD and mental health in a way that we've never seen before. Definitely one to watch in 2018.

MOSS

■ PSVR | ■ Polyarc | ■ February 2018

[5] We know that VR can be great for sending your adrenaline levels through the roof – be it in the seat of a virtual car or being hunted in an immersive nightmare – but what about a game that just wants to charm your socks off? That's *Moss* to a tee, a new cutesy platformer that sees you helping a plucky young mouse by the name of Quill as she sets out, sword in paw, to explore a fantastical world beyond. You control Quill while interacting with the world via a glowing blue orb. Think of it as playing co-op with yourself, using your spectral powers to reveal passages or throwing enemies onto switches. With a whimsical aesthetic and feel that evokes the good ol' days of Fable, *Moss* is a spellbinding new addition for PSVR.

GOLEM

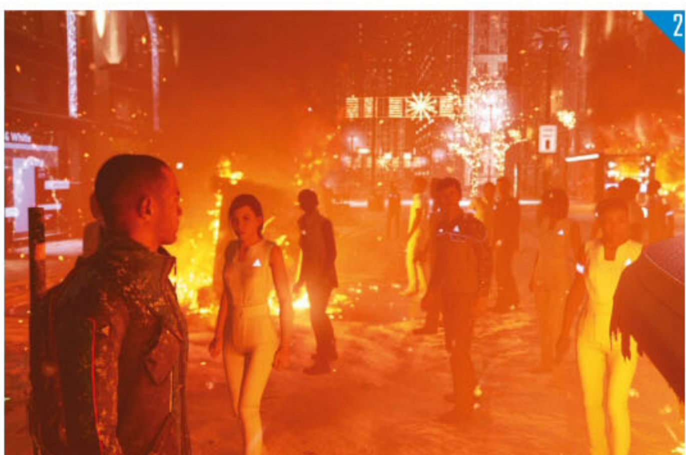
■ PSVR | ■ Highwire Games | ■ TBC 2018

[6] Coming from Martin O'Donnell (the composer who created some of the most recognisable scores for the early Halo games before falling out bigtime with Bungie) and the rest of the team at new studio Highwire Games, *Golem* was actually meant to be a PSVR launch title before it slipped beyond that October 2016 window. That's not to say we're any less excited for a game that lets you control 15-foot giant creatures made of rock. Well, *technically* you play an injured child who learns to build golems and possess them, but let's not split hairs – you'll still get to explore a fantastical new world and battle other golems in some adrenaline-fuelled swordfights à la Power Ranger Megazords.

1

SONY'S 4K VISIONS

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE PLAYSTATION STUNNERS DRIVING A NEW STANDARD OF VISUAL FIDELITY



2

DETROIT: BECOME HUMAN

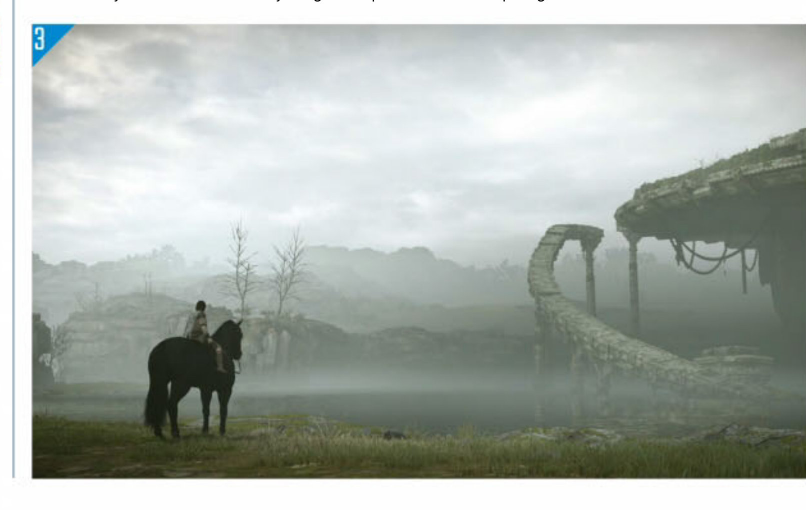
■ PS4 | ■ Quantic Dream | ■ Q2 2018

[2] Say what you will about Quantic Dream and its trademark divisive style of game design, but there can be no denying that it has an eye for capturing the dynamism of cinema. *Detroit: Become Human* is an interactive thriller in which you navigate a world fraught with rising tension. As androids begin to gain sentience, pushing back against the world of slavery they were born in to, you'll be tasked with taking control of three starring protagonists and shaping the adventure as writer, actor and director. Quantic Dream has set out to build its most 'bendable' story ever, ensuring that your decisions truly reflect and shape the interactive nature of this narrative. *Detroit* is one of the best-looking games coming in 2018, with the arrival of 4K assets putting a real spotlight on the studio's incredible motion-capture and face-scanning technology. Trust us, *Detroit* is going to be one of the most technically impressive and challenging games of the year.

SHADOW OF THE COLOSSUS

■ PS4 | ■ Bluepoint, SIE Japan Studio | ■ February 2018

[3] Does a game from 2005 really benefit from the technology of 2018? In the case of *Shadow Of The Colossus* it certainly does. This legendary PS2 adventure game is being given a full remake by developer Bluepoint – known for its lovingly crafted HD remasters of old classics. Funnily enough, ultra-high definition art assets and HDR-support only help imbue a game that's trading so heavily on spectacle; *Shadow Of The Colossus* is as beautiful today as was 13 years ago, with its minimalist landscape design and stunning enemy scale looking all the more impressive thanks to the PS4 Pro. Remaking classics is risky business, but from what we've played of it, *Shadow Of The Colossus* is going to be a must play (and see) experience all over again – trust us, you've *never* seen anything look quite this awe-inspiring before.



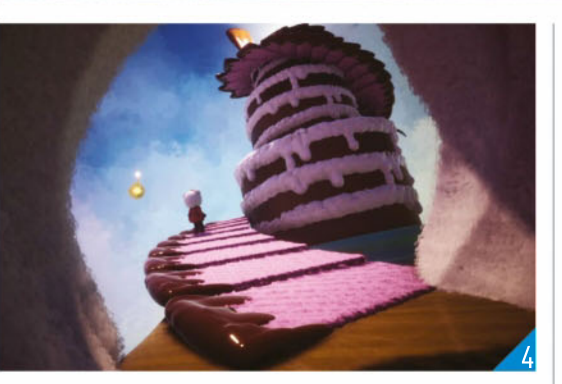
3



GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

■ PS4 | ■ Sucker Punch | ■ TBC 2018

[1] This is going to be the year in which game design finally catches up with the constant escalation we've seen in visual fidelity; 4K gaming arrived on the home console scene in 2016 thanks to the release of the PS4 Pro and we are finally starting to see studios taking advantage of the power afforded by the upgraded system. *Ghost Of Tsushima* is one of the year's most anticipated titles, and that's not only because it looks stunning, but because it's coming together as a true product of its time. Sucker Punch has spent the last few years building a sprawling open-world samurai game, set in the fires of feudal Japan, and we couldn't be more excited to see such an interesting period of history brought to life in a way that we've never experienced before. As the last samurai of Tsushima Island, you'll be tasked with battling back against the Mongol army; of exploring the incredible world the engineers and artists of Sucker Punch have spent so long crafting; of learning a new array of lethal fighting styles; and immersing yourself in a culture on the verge of total destruction. Sucker Punch has a habit of delivering truly stunning-looking videogames, and *Ghost Of Tsushima* is going to signal a new standard of quality.



4

DREAMS

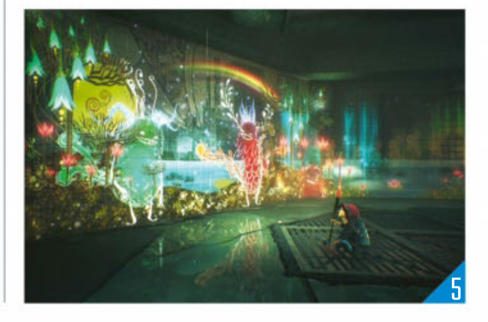
■ PS4 | ■ Media Molecule | ■ TBC 2018

[4] Media Molecule has now been missing-in-action for two whole years. The last we saw of *Dreams*, it was 2015, and we were beginning to get a glimpse into what the new generation meant for user-generated content. While we're still waiting, we can only imagine it's because Media Molecule – a small, notoriously secretive studio by design – is hard at work, pushing to truly merge the LittleBigPlanet 'play, create and share' mantra into one seamless, interwoven experience. One thing we are certain of is that *Dreams*' sandbox, a space in which you are free to bring new art (in whatever form that should take) to life, is going to look stunning running through an HDR-enabled set; Media Molecule is working across a vibrant colour palette here, and you just know that it's going to *pop* when it finally arrives later this year.

CONCRETE GENIE

■ PSVR | ■ PixelOpus | ■ TBC 2018

[5] *Concrete Genie* wants to turn each of us into an artist. In this experimental action-adventure game from PixelOpus, a studio built by Sony to encourage new ideas and projects from young developers making a start in the industry, we will take on the role of Ash, a kid looking to escape the boredom of his hometown – and the attention of the local bullies – by bringing a splash of colour to his surroundings. *Concrete Genie* is set across areas that can be freely explored and returned to as more of the city opens up over time, using the DualShock controller to freely paint artwork onto the somewhat dour urban environments that surround you. A simple paint stroke will transform into living artwork that you are able to interact and play with – much of the fun here will come from having fun with paint. It looks gorgeous, vibrant and like the kind of experience that HDR was designed to enhance.



5

ANOTHER YEAR OF PS4 DOMINANCE?

It has the games, it has the lead, but does it have everything it needs to beat the competition?



The launch of the Xbox One X should be putting the cat among the proverbial pigeons as the race for 4K supremacy gives this generation's console war a slightly different flavour, but the fact of the matter is that PlayStation 4 may just be too strong to be beaten at this point and no amount of graphical magic can change that.

The PS4 has lost the ability to claim that it is the best console for exclusives *and* for playing third-party games, since the Xbox One X should be able to offer third-party games at native 4K resolutions far more of the time. However, it's the exclusive side of the equation and the way in which Sony's in-house development teams seem so much more comfortable with their system than Microsoft's teams that makes all the difference.

We're simply not seeing games on the scale or graphical quality of *Ghost Of Tsushima*, *Horizon Zero Dawn* or *Detroit* coming to the Xbox One X and, with the lead that the PS4 already boasts, why would any PS4 owner or late-comer to the generation think to pick up anything other than the most popular machine on the market; the one that's getting all the best DLC exclusives ahead of the competition and where most of your friends are already well and truly parked.

This could be a very good year for the Xbox One X and we hope a fantastic year for the Nintendo Switch, but we're fully expecting, thanks in large part to a swathe of exclusive titles due out in 2018, that the PS4 will continue to dominate in terms of sales and eye-catching releases. Whether or not it has the titles to support another wave after this (and whether PSVR will get the killer app it deserves), we hope to find out as the year unfolds. Everyone else is just going to have to be content with playing catch-up for another year.

INDIE STUNNERS

THE INDEPENDENT PROJECTS BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THE INDUSTRY

PHANTOM DOCTRINE

■ PC | ■ CreativeForge Games | ■ Q2 2018

[1] It would be far too easy to dismiss *Phantom Doctrine* as another XCOM clone, one that was merely shaking off its science-fiction flavour in favour of heading into the Cold War. That would be doing the game a huge disservice, because *Phantom Doctrine* is clearly one of the most exciting strategy games coming in 2018. In returning to an era barely touched since *Sid Meier's Covert Action*, and in taking a handful of familiar strategy elements and employing a hearty amount of iteration over them, there's an almost irresistible pull to CreativeForge's creation.

Set around a rich alternative history, one that is anchored by historical figures and events, *Phantom Doctrine* sets about exploring the next generation of turn-based combat. The game has been designed to be familiar – XCOM players will easily understand its cover mechanics, for example – but surprise in its insanely flexible bank of movements, actions and abilities. It means the scope of the battlefield and the engagements you complete within them has expanded, with *Phantom Doctrine* also supporting full assault and stealth game styles – giving you the freedom to play your way, pursuing research, upgrades and customisation to better suit you and the task at hand. *Phantom Doctrine* is refreshing after the stress-hell that was *XCOM II*. It's a turn-based strategy game focused on overhauling and improving the basics, and there's something oddly satisfying about that.



2

THE ARTFUL ESCAPE

■ PC, Xbox One | ■ Beethoven & Dinosaur | ■ TBC 2018

[2] We've always been intrigued by *The Artful Escape*, now missing its 'of Francis Vendetti' subtitle as Annapurna Interactive – responsible for helping the stunning *What Remains Of Edith Finch* out of the door – steps in to assist developer Beethoven & Dinosaur after it failed to meet its original Kickstarter funding goal. The game is from the mind of Johnny Galvatron, lead singer of Australian indie-rock band The Galvatrons, and is a wild coming together of side-scrolling platforming and music. Vendetti uses the power of music to explore a psychedelic world, with sound samples central to much of your interactions with the environments and enemies you'll encounter along the way. *The Artful Escape* is a kind of beautiful arthouse project, a strange proposition that we don't get enough of in videogames any more. Expect this one to make some noise in 2018, it's scheduled for release "when it's damn ready".

LIGHT FALL

■ PC | ■ Bishop Games | ■ Q1 2018

[3] *Light Fall* looks intent on injecting a little more abstract challenge into the 2D platformer. On the surface, it's easy to dismiss this stunning new title from Bishop Games, but the truth is that there's more than meets the eye. That's largely because of the introduction of an item called The Shadow Care, a block that can be summoned at any time and be used as a support platform – used to increase momentum and further increase your opportunities for traversal. *Light Fall* uses this mechanic to great effect, influencing both the layout of the levels and the design of its puzzles – a platformer that's pushing you to unlearn some of the basics. Combine that with a, frankly, arresting visual design and *Light Fall* is looking like an early must-play in the indie space.

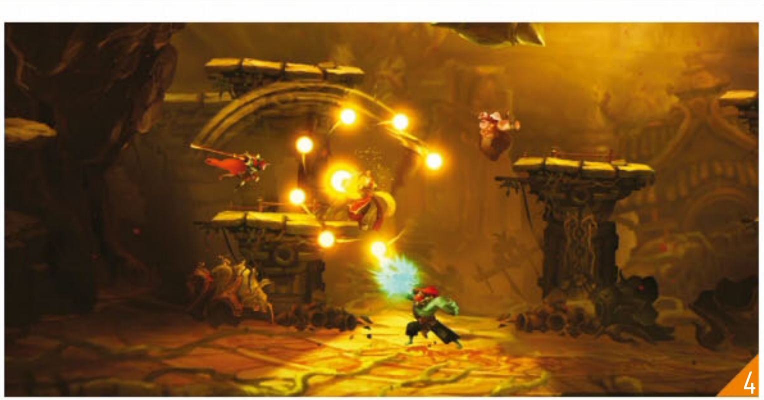


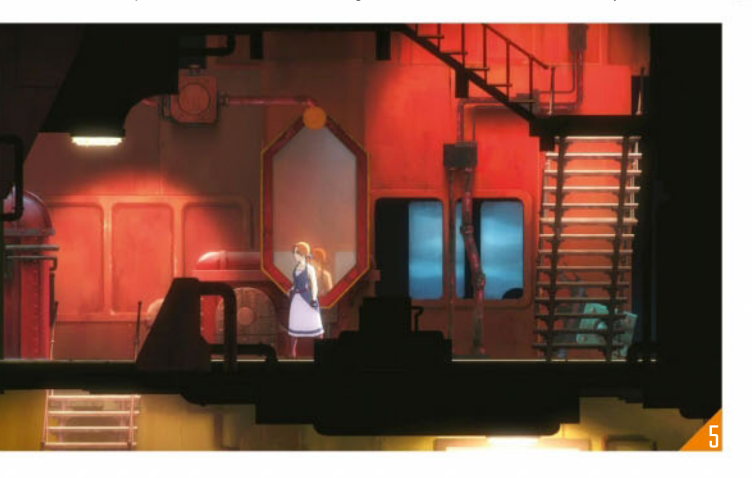


UNRULY HEROES

■ PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One | ■ Magic Design Studios | ■ TBC 2018

[4] Inspired by iconic Chinese fable 'A Journey To The West', *Unruly Heroes* is a wild adaptation of the Monkey King Legend – reimagining its world as the playground for an intensive action-adventure game. It's easy to get lost in the visuals; stunning art design, super-smooth animation and some rather impressive use of both lighting and particle effects, but there's more to this than mere looks alone. *Unruly Heroes* is also offering up four-player co-operative play, should you care to share your adventure with others, although the option to engage in online PvP with your choice out of the four unique character types will also be there. If you feel as if there is a *Castle Crashers*-shaped hole in your life, *Unruly Heroes* could indeed be the game to fill it when it launches early into 2018.





FORGOTTON ANNE

■ PC, PS4, Xbox One | ■ Throughline Games | ■ TBC 2018

[5] With animation clearly influenced by the works of Studio Ghibli, it's easy to fall in love with *Forgotton Anne*. There's a clear line to be drawn between it and *Howl's Moving Castle* and *Tales From Earthsea*, though the similarities are merely surface deep. That's because Throughline Games is trying to create something quite progressive here, a project that combines cinematic storytelling and branching narratives. It goes all-in on world building and character to create an independent experience unlike any other. While the title doesn't have a confirmed release date, we love what we've seen of it so far, with each of its frames positively dripping with personality and charm – its beauty paired with light platforming and a narrative designed to shift with every decision made. We can't wait to see more *Forgotton Anne*, a game that can't help but conjure fond memories of weekend anime we were all treated to by various networks as kids.

THE DOUBLE-A GAME RETURNS

A NEW MIDDLE TIER OF GAMING IS GROWING IN STRENGTH AND WE COULDN'T BE HAPPIER ABOUT THAT

BIOMUTANT
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Experiment 101
TBC 2018

DARKSIDERS III
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Gunfire Games
TBC 2018

PILLARS OF ETERNITY II: DEADFIRE
PC
Obsidian Entertainment
TBC 2018

THE BARD'S TALE IV
PC
InXile Entertainment
TBC 2018

MOUNT & BLADE II: BANNERLORD
PS4, Xbox One, PC
TaleWorlds Entertainment
TBC 2018

KINGDOM COME: DELIVERANCE
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Warhorse Studios
13 Feb 2018

A CONCEPT IN GAMING THAT WE HAVE BEMOANED THE LOSS OF IN RECENT YEARS, PRETTY MUCH FROM THE LATER HALF OF THE LAST GENERATION TO NOW, WAS THE EXISTENCE OF A MIDDLE TIER OF GAMING. The triple-A games emerged as great, hulking behemoths in the last generation, spinning multiple millions of pounds on their launch weekends and dominating the charts for months. Once upon a time, however, there would be games from THQ, Midway, Atari and perhaps some smaller releases from Ubisoft, Activision and EA that would fill the gaps between these tent pole titles. Somewhere along the way, those games got squeezed out, but now it really feels like they're coming back.

Perhaps emboldened by the rise of indie games and the growing budgets that independent studios are able to attract with the support of crowdfunding, we're seeing several examples of games that aren't quite triple-A in their approach, genre, team size and/or budget, but are no less enticing and exciting for that. These are games that fill a niche or that innovate in some interesting way that some of the bigger publishers rarely feel comfortable doing. They are the cement that binds our gaming year together and some of 2018's titles are incredibly exciting.

In 2016, Nordic Games renamed itself THQ Nordic having acquired the defunct THQ brand and its titles. Since then, it's been establishing a stable of titles that really feels like it's living up to the best of what that publisher achieved in its brightest days. Top of its upcoming releases are two exciting action games, ***Biomutant* [1]** and ***Darksiders III* [2]**. While the former is a new IP and the later a sequel, both are from relatively new development studios looking to establish themselves and both come with heavy RPG elements on top of the action surface. Darksiders has already established its heritage, bringing together the smooth combat of a God Of War game with the world exploration and progression of a Legend Of Zelda release. As we move on to playing as Fury, the third of four horsemen of the apocalypse according to the game's lore, we're expecting an exciting mix of hack 'n' slash combat with some gigantic bosses and lots of puzzle solving in a post-apocalyptic world. *Biomutant*, on the other hand, brings us an open-world experience with combat that feels closer to Devil May Cry, perhaps by way of Viewtiful Joe in its presentation. With a heavily customisable lead creature, crafting of weapons and a narration system, developer Experiment 101 is packing this game with ideas.

> "SOMEWHERE ALONG THE WAY THOSE GAMES GOT SQUEEZED OUT, BUT NOW IT REALLY FEELS LIKE THEY'RE COMING BACK"

Two studios that have never been short of ideas, but have sometimes been short of funds and publisher backing, are Obsidian Entertainment and InXile Games, but thankfully due to the era of crowdfunding, both have been able to delve back into their great strengths of RPG making to bring us new and exciting projects. For Obsidian, that means a sequel to its isometric cRPG smash hit *Pillars Of Eternity*, this time with improved combat and an angry god on your tail in ***Pillars Of Eternity II: Deadfire* [3]**. A few years ago, tapping into the classic computer role-playing genre would have seemed like a pretty odd move, but we're delighted the genre has experienced a comeback with titles such as PoE, *Torment*, *Tyranny* and Divinity. InXile in the mean time is taking a break from its isometric titles (like *Wasteland 3* expected in 2019) with ***The Bard's Tale IV* [4]**, the long-awaited and well-backed sequel to the classic series started in 1985. This first-person dungeon crawler boasts Unreal Engine 4 power and some amazing texture-capturing techniques that give the game a fantastic atmosphere.

But while these classic studios have found great support in this new era, it's also good to see new hotbeds of development find some space to express themselves and deliver some new interpretations on classic role-playing ideas. Turkish developer TaleWorlds, for instance, has achieved incredible things with Mount & Blade, originally launched in 2007, but very well-supported since. It's first full sequel, ***Mount & Blade II: Bannerlord* [5]** promises to bring us even more political machinations, faction building and horse-mounted combat. It's actually a prequel to the previous *Warband* expansion.

Meanwhile, in a similarly politically driven, medieval-inspired direction, we have ***Kingdom Come: Deliverance* [6]**, the RPG that promises to bring Eastern European realism to the generation. The combat system is really what has had us intrigued about this one for so many »



1 ■ Above: Your hero in *Biomutant* is always a furry critter of some kind, but it can be changed a huge amount in terms of size, body shape, fur colouring and limbs and attachments. How this will effect your gameplay experience is going to be interesting.



2 ■ Right: The re-emergence of the isometric RPG has been one of the most mysterious but delightful comebacks of recent years, and Obsidian has been doing some of the best work around, as *Pillar Of Eternity II* is likely to reiterate.



■ Original game creator Joe Madureira, now of Airship Syndicate and *Battle Chasers: Nightwar*, came back to the series to help with the design of Fury, keeping the continuity of his style through the franchise.









■ **Left:** *Kingdom Come: Deliverance* is bringing some amazing elements of realism to its RPG experience, such as levelling that's based around really doing and learning techniques, as well as sword combat that puts *For Honor* to shame and a story quite literally out of the Middle Ages of European history.

THE CREW 2
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Ivory Tower
16 March 2018

SKULL & BONES
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Ubisoft Singapore
TBC 2018

METAL GEAR SURVIVE
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Konami
TBC 2018

VAMPYR
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Dontnod Entertainment
Q2 2018

JURASSIC WORLD EVOLUTION
PS4, Xbox One, PC
Frontier Developments
June 2018

BATTLETECH
PC
Harebrained Schemes
TBC 2018

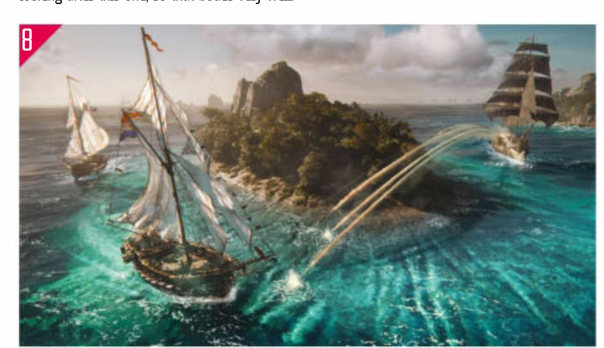


7

The Crew got a rough ride on release thanks to some buggy launch connectivity, but it turned itself around really well and now this sequel should help to reset everyone's expectations.

Below: We're not sure that *Skull & Bones* is the pirate experience people are expecting, but it still looks like being pretty intense and exciting stuff. The *Black Flag* team at Ubisoft Singapore is looking after this one, so that bodes very well.

8





9

Above: *Metal Gear Survive* might still feel like it's trespassing on the memory and legacy of Hideo Kojima at Konami, but the more we see of it, the more intriguing it looks. It might not end up being a good Metal Gear game, but it could be a good multiplayer-survival experience.

10

We would never have thought that Dontnod would follow up *Life Is Strange* and its confidence in episodic story-telling with a vampiric action game, but that's what we're getting with *Vampyr* and it's looking very interesting indeed.

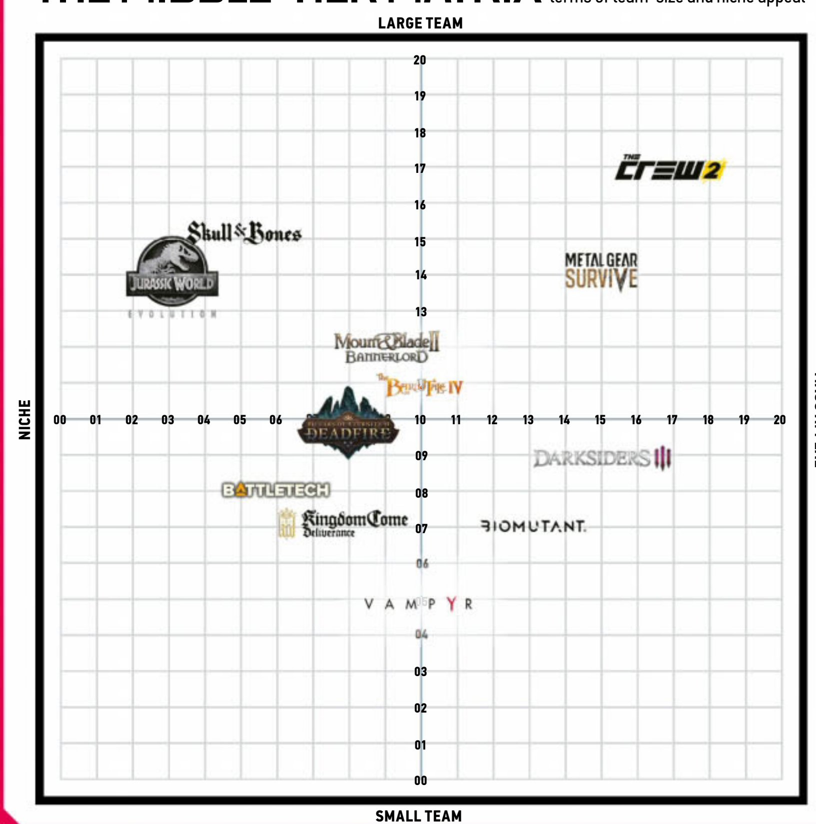
■ Below: It's amazing that it's taken this long for a team to build a fully featured park sim with the Jurassic franchise behind it. This game from Frontier already looks the part and has some fantastic creature animation.





THE MIDDLE-TIER MATRIX

Where 2018's double-A games sit in terms of team-size and niche appeal



months. Based on real combat techniques from 1400s Bohemia, you can be killed with just a couple of hits, which means fights are going to be insanely tense. Plus it all works on a similar, though slightly more involved, system to *For Honor*.

Ubisoft isn't letting these smaller publishers and indies have all the fun though, and that's good to see, as ***The Crew 2* [7]** and ***Skull & Bones* [8]** offer up some interesting diversions from its mainline of triple-A releases. We don't say that to knock the ambitions, teams or budgets behind these games (or any other games we talk about here, because we're really into them), but these are much more niche and quirky in their approach compared to the mainstream appeal of an Assassin's Creed title. *The Crew 2* will be looking to establish its open-world, persistent racing experience in a way that the original didn't quite manage at launch, but has been building on ever since. Ubisoft and Ivory Tower kept working on the concept and fixing issues until *The Crew* became a really quite excellent racing experience. This sequel adds the ability to switch between vehicle types (cars, bikes, planes and boats) on the fly, whenever you want. It all looks colourful, action-packed and very nicely put together, as you would expect from Ubisoft.

Skull & Bones looks similarly awesome, building on the expertise of Ubisoft Singapore with sea combat in *Assassin's Creed III* and *Black Flag* with a tactical sea-faring experience. We're expecting something a bit more like Anno than Assassin's Creed from this one, but with all of the budget and engine power Ubisoft can muster, that could be something pretty incredible.

Konami could be argued to be taking a step back from triple-A game-making these days, but it's not letting go of the Metal Gear franchise as ***Metal Gear Survive* [9]** dips its toe into survival multiplayer. While there's still plenty of cynicism around this first Metal Gear without Kojima at the helm, there's a quiet whisper going around that it might actually be quite fun. It's kind of like a version of *Fortnite*, but using the Fox Engine and *Phantom Pain* mechanics. It's totally odd, but it needs to be given some attention.

In a similar vein, there have been some doubts around ***Vampyr* [10]**, Dontnod's peculiar follow-up to *Life Is Strange*. Its core premise of a vampiric doctor battling with his need for blood, however, still sounds like a fantastic setup and the more we get to see it, the more intrigued about it we become. The voice acting still leaves a bit to be desired (which is odd given the *LIS* pedigree), but the structure and vampire mechanics look really good. It might ultimately sit somewhere in among all those Sherlock Holmes games by Frogwares, but we have a soft spot for those, too.

So, while action games dominate this space like they do so many others, strategy has had to step away from the triple-A realm and find its footing and our joy of the grind in a slightly retreated, but fertile ground. In this area, you'll find two gigantic titles for tactical gaming offering two ends of the cerebral planning scale in ***Jurassic World Evolution* [11]** and the return of ***BattleTech* [12]**. Harebrained Schemes' is bringing back the boardgame property in videogame form with a gorgeous turn-based combat experience. Giant mechs go toe-to-toe across massive maps with some really nice modular destruction that lets you take off limbs from the machines as you tear into them. Having already done some good work on Shadowrun in recent years we expect Harebrained Schemes will do a great job on *BattleTech*.

On the other end of the tactical scale is the entirely not combat-focused *Jurassic World Evolution*, bringing together the theme park expertise of Frontier Developments with the world's most beloved dangerous theme park concept. We're not sure we've been this excited about a park-management game since the original *Theme Park*, but then even that didn't let you build a Brachiosaurus enclosure. The graphical detail Frontier is working with is absolutely superb and the animation looks to be coming straight out of Amblin Entertainment's CGI vaults. We still can't think of a studio we would rather have working on this dream strategy project and it looks to be doing a fantastic job.

So, in summary, it looks like the next 12 months has its fair share of very exciting and often unusual or innovative titles coming that don't quite fit comfortably into either the indie or triple-A brackets. They may not prove to be game-changers or blockbusters, but they could end up on a few game of the years lists without you even realising what you're doing.

THE YEAR IN FIGHTERS

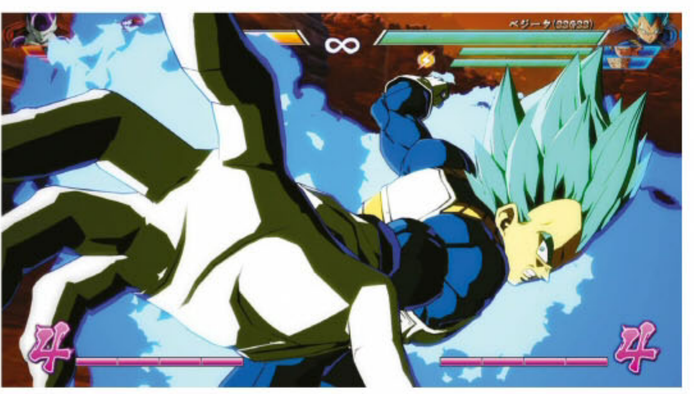
THE BRAWLERS LOOKING TO RAISE THE BAR IN 2018

DRAGON BALL FIGHTERZ

■ PC, PS4, Xbox One | ■ Arc System Works | ■ 26 January 2018

[1] The logical conclusion of Arc's fine work in the fighting field to date, this tag-team brawler is a dream come true for many a fan of virtual pugilism. Using the same incredible tech as employed in Guilty Gear's recent revival, characters, environments and effects all accurately mimic their 2D anime counterparts while actually being 3D models – we've seen cel shading and similar techniques used to capture the feel of shows such as *Naruto*, *Bleach* and *Dragon Ball* in the past, but Arc's solution is very much the final form of this kind of tech. On a gameplay level, the three-on-three setup, partner assists, OTT super attacks and frantic pace will see the game slip easily into the still-warm boots of Marvel Vs Capcom, both for players and viewers – the former have been missing that configuration since Marvel dialled back to two-on-two teams for *Infinite*, while the latter have seen this brand of chaotic fighting tumble down the hierarchy at competitive events of late while anime fighters continue to rise, leaving *DBFZ* perfectly positioned to cash in on both aspects. Arc already proved itself capable of enticing newcomers to the fighting scene with the beginner-friendly *Persona 4 Arena*, so Goku's army of admirers will be free to jump in whatever level of fighting experience they may or may not have.









BLAZBLUE: CROSS TAG BATTLE

■ PC, PS4, Switch | ■ Arc System Works | ■ TBC 2018

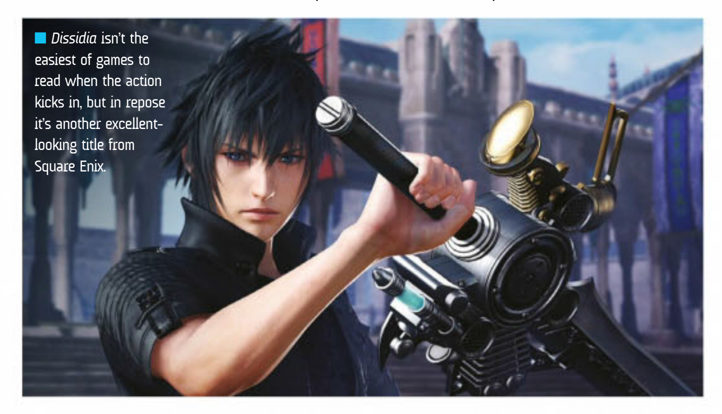
[2] Arc is one of the most reliable fighting game developers in the business, which is doubly impressive when you consider just how many projects the studio tends to juggle at any given time. Announced at Evo earlier in the year, this crossover fighter brings together the stars of BlazBlue, *Persona 4 Arena*, *Under Night In-Birth* and anime series *RWBY* and chucks them all into typically ridiculous two-on-two battles – exactly the kind of shot in the arm the BlazBlue series has needed after starting to feel a little stagnant in recent outings. It's a shame not to see Guilty Gear characters rock up to duke it out, but that's simply an engine issue. All characters in *Cross Tag Battle* use Arc's still-lovely hand-drawn animation, meaning the 3D models used in *–SIGN–* and *–REVELATOR–* would look all kinds of out of place here. Still, it's not like there isn't plenty of variety across the roster on show already, and we'd put money on the final line-up being one of the most diverse in fighting game history. Balance will be another matter entirely (Arc is pretty good at this, against all odds, to be fair), but as in other crossover series like MVC, it's not the end of the world if power fantasy and spectacle sometimes take the front seat to tight competitive balance, but we'll see where it lands next year.



DISSIDIA FINAL FANTASY NT

■ PS4 | ■ Team Ninja | ■ 30 January 2018

[3] Taken completely out of context, Dissidia is perhaps the most confusing, ridiculous and obtuse fighting game series ever made. The screen is a mess of unintuitive HUD elements, rainbows of numbers, explosive effects and flashy attack animations, but somehow it works. After sitting through a bunch tutorials that help make sense of its ludicrous lasagne of mechanics and getting to grips with its aggressively non-traditional combat (which shares as much with action-RPGs as it does with regular fighters), it feels way more simple to play than its cluttered screen lets on – there's a wonderful flow to battles as combatants soar all around the arenas battering the crap out of one another, and the cast of FF heroes and villains is so wonderfully varied by its very nature that no two match-ups play out alike. Furthering that, *NT* one-ups the simple battles of the PSP games by shifting to three-on-three combat, creating even more variety to encounters and adding yet more screen furniture. If you're looking for a fighting game that breaks the mould and offers something completely different to its peers, you've come to the right place. Or, if you just want to make Cloud, Squall and Noctis team up to take on Sephiroth, Kefka and Kuja, you'll enjoy the same kind of typically excellent fan service we've come to expect from modern FF spin-offs.



■ *Dissidia* isn't the easiest of games to read when the action kicks in, but in repose it's another excellent-looking title from Square Enix.









■ Ah, Skullomania. We've missed you, you Kamen Rider lunatic. We fully expect to see more classic EX characters return, and we wouldn't be surprised to see some new faces, too.



FIGHTING EX LAYER

■ PS4 | ■ Arika | ■ TBC 2018

[4] In the run-up to *Street Fighter V*'s release, **Play** magazine ran a poll of over 70,000 fans to see which characters they wanted to see in the new fighter. Hyperactive skeleton-suited oddball Skullomania from the Street Fighter EX games topped the vote by a fairly comfortable margin, despite being owned by external developer Arika and therefore unlikely to return. Now, though, those fans are about to get exactly what they asked for – Skullomania, alongside other EX favourites like Garuda, Darun and D Dark, will return in Arika's own original fighter, a Street Fighter EX title in all but name, effectively. The game's main gimmick comes in the form of the Gougi system, effectively decks of perks that can be applied to characters to alter how they play slightly. Think *Street Fighter X Tekken*'s Gem system, only with far more room for customisation and creativity thanks to a wide array of Gougi – and more planned to be added at regular intervals. You can have five active at once, so do you stack meter gain buffs to make sure you're always sat on a super, boost chip damage to enhance your zoning game, or buff normals to make it so your bread-and-butter combos are all you need? We can't wait to try it out, and we won't have to – there's a beta running over Christmas. Skullo Dream!

GIMME THE LOOT

THE RISE AND RISE OF THE LOOT BOX

PAID LOOT BOXES, IN WHICH PLAYERS PURCHASE ACCESS TO A RANDOMISED SET OF REWARDS, HAVE BEEN PART OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY FOR A DECADE NOW. The idea was popularised in Asia as a means for publishers to make a monetary return from those consumers without enough disposable income to pay full price for a game, however, the system has now become a Western staple. At first the practice was a copy of that used in Asia and was limited to games, such as *Team Fortress 2*, that came without an initial fee for entry. Nowadays, though, the likes of the FIFA series and the upcoming *Star Wars Battlefront II* – as well as other games that demand a retail fee to take home – are including variations on the loot box as a core design pillar.

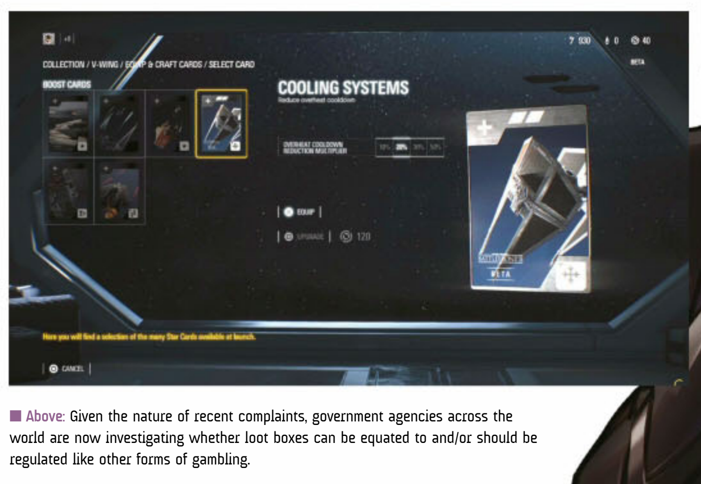
Many players are angry with the idea of being asked to pay for access and then again for certain content, with things boiling over to such an extent in the run up to *Battlefront II*'s release that EA was forced to change the game's loot box structure following vitriolic fan feedback.

Despite the protests, loot boxes are here to stay for the foreseeable future and, unpopular as they might be in the eyes of many, they are a much-needed source of revenue for a games industry that has been woefully inadequate when it comes to taking advantage of its ever-increasing popularity.

For games to survive, developers of games need to turn a profit. No profit, no money to plough back into future development. With development budgets for large triple-A titles, such as *Battlefront II*, rising in order to satisfy an ever-more expectant audience, publishers need to find new ways to make a return on their investment.

> "THE GAMES INDUSTRY HAS BEEN WOEFULLY INADEQUATE IN TAKING ADVANTAGE OF ITS EVER-INCREASING POPULARITY"

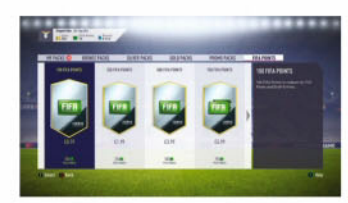
These budgetary problems are compounded by the fact that many players demand an online component from the biggest titles, forcing ongoing costs relating to server maintenance, the creation of patch updates, online security and the associated wage costs of employing people for these jobs.

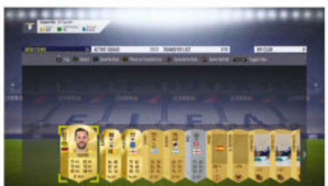


■ Above: Given the nature of recent complaints, government agencies across the world are now investigating whether loot boxes can be equated to and/or should be regulated like other forms of gambling.



■ Left: Loot boxes have been a part of the games industry for a number of years now and, in spite of the recent backlashes, they look like they are here to stay.





■ Above: Microtransactions bring in huge money for the games industry. In 2016, EA brought in 650 million dollars through Ultimate Team sales alone.

Yes, games might make more money than 20 years ago, but the creation and ongoing costs are much higher.

The rise of lower retail fees, thanks to digital distribution, as well as the increasing popularity of free-to-play gaming, means players will not stomach a rise in initial purchase price and so other avenues need to be taken advantage of. Loot boxes are one of those avenues, but the rushed, haphazard and cynical way some have implemented them (see: Scraping The Loot Barrel, right) has caused unnecessary irritation and suspicion throughout the gaming community.

Battlefront II's loot boxes were an example of this cynicism in that they essentially allowed players to pay-to-win by purchasing access to character upgrades. This concept is at the heart of the game industry's struggle with loot boxes: how do they incentivise us to buy the loot boxes they need us to buy in order for them to turn a profit and continue to exist?

Asking us to pay for the juiciest content is one way, but it raises moral questions regarding how we want games to work. When we buy a game, are we expecting to buy access to a game, or are we buying equal access to a game? There is a real distinction between the two ideas.

When you buy a ticket for a flight with a budget airline, you are asked up front whether you want to purchase an option such as 'Speedy Boarding'. If you buy it, you gain priority access. If you don't, you join a secondary queue of passengers. This is unequal access, but it's spelled out clearly upon purchase, so you know what you're getting.

Game loot boxes essentially work in the same way, by asking if you want priority access, but the exact nature of that access is unknown and the very idea that priority access is available isn't always communicated before you buy. Those with the most disposable income (or, at least, the most willingness to part with disposable income) can easily make up any inequality gap, setting up a class system within an environment some thought classless after that first purchase.

Still, for now the system is here to stay thanks to a lack of a better alternative. The idea of subscription fees and turning 'games into a service' is not a working alternative for most releases because we often want to indulge in a wide variety of interactive entertainment and, as such, don't want to pay monthly fees to access each and every game. A Netflix model of a single monthly fee to access a range of games is more palatable, we would suggest, but the games industry is currently too fractured along hardware and publisher fault lines to make it feasible on a grand scale.

The implementation of loot boxes at present feels like a puncture repair kit. The industry is leaking potential income by not having found a sustainable way to draw the extra revenues required to fund its biggest titles. It's plugging the hole with loot boxes. EA's *Battlefront II* debacle is ample evidence of an industry with little clue as to how to evolve from a puncture repair kit to the whole new tire it needs to find.

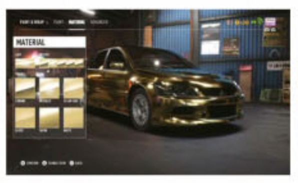
SCRAPING THE LOOT BARREL

The worst examples of looting our wallets



MIDDLE-EARTH: SHADOW OF WAR

Loot boxes in single-player games are controversial at the best of times, but they're particularly tough to swallow if the most powerful content is locked away within them. *Shadow Of War* asks you to recruit orc warriors to attack and defend structures, with the best fighters obtained by unlocking loot boxes. The difficulty level is so high without these superior specimens in tow that some have suggested the game is almost impossible to complete without them.



NEED FOR SPEED PAYBACK

Instead of tuning and upgrading cars, *Payback* asks you to use 'Speed Cards' to improve performance. You can grind away to obtain them, or you can buy them. The problem is that the grinding is painfully slow, to the point that it feels like the system is designed to force you into submission and part with extra cash. As per *Battlefront II*, *Payback*'s loot system has recently changed due to intensely negative feedback from fans.



NBA 2K18

While you're not buying loot boxes in *NBA 2K18*, you are incentivised to continually part with extra cash. 'VC' is required to purchase many in-game items, which can be earned by playing and winning games, but the rate at which you do so is ridiculously slow. Seriously, it's *ridiculously* slow. Surprise, surprise, you can overcome the grind by spending your own money…

THE RISE OF THE RETRO INDIES

THE INDEPENDENT THROWBACKS THAT ARE MAKING CLASSIC GENRES AND STYLES LIVE AGAIN…



UFO 50

■ Derek Yu, Eirik Suhrke, Jon Perry, Paul Hubans, Ojiro Fumoto
■ PC | ■ Q3 2018

[1] A collaboration between five veteran indie devs, *UFO 50* is a collection of 50 games. Not minigames or Mario Party-like challenges, no, *UFO 50*'s titles are actual fully-fledged games. The 50 titles will cover a wide net of genres, and about a third of them will include multiplayer. The developers say that these retro-inspired games will be a bit smaller than 8-bit commercial releases, however that's no reason to turn your nose up at the compilation. This is a massive explosion of content, from an all-star, Avengers-style team of developers that brought you the likes of *Spelunky*, *Downwell* and *World Of Goo*.



WARGROOVE

■ Chucklefish
■ PC, Switch, Xbox One | ■ Q1 2018

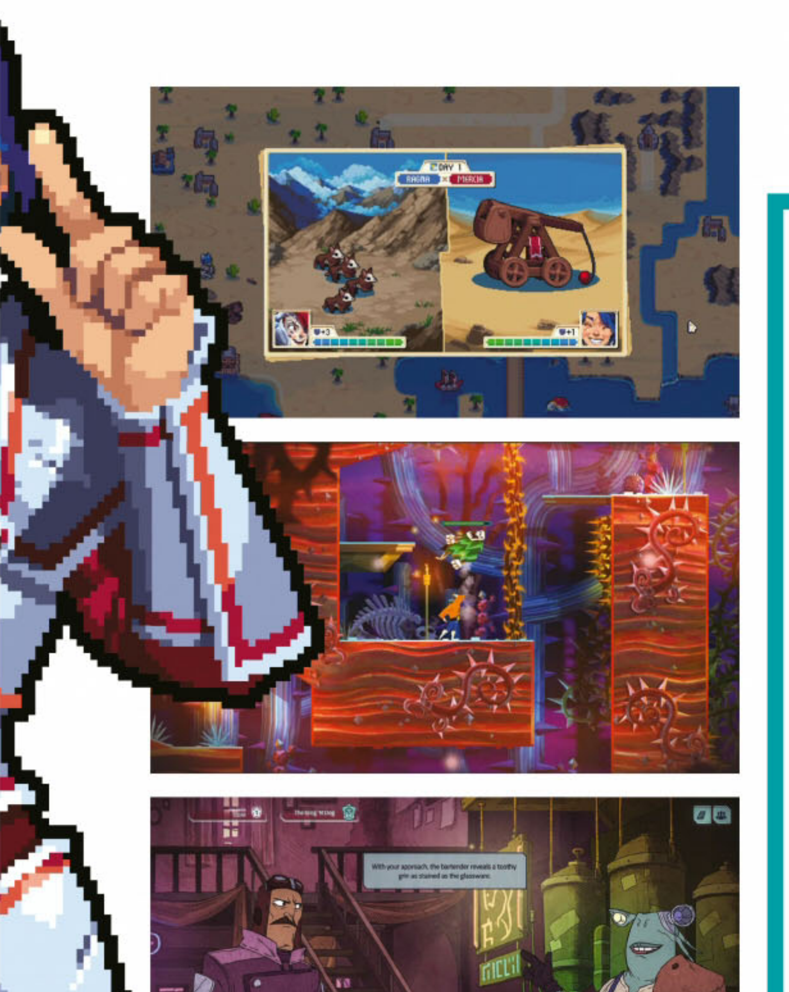
[2] British developer/publisher Chucklefish is proving to be a deft hand in restoring halcyon games and genres back to glory. For *Wargroove* its sights are firmly on the work of Intelligent Systems developer of Fire Emblem and Advance Wars. This turn-based strategy looks almost exactly like the latter, with bright, nostalgic colours and similar menu and battle systems, however Chucklefish has mixed things up by using a medieval setting, rather than a modern-day one. The developer has not misfired to date, so this is one to keep an eye out for.



SPELUNKY 2

■ Chucklefish
■ PS4 | ■ Q4 2018

[3] One of the most acclaimed indies of all time is receiving a sequel, much to all of our surprise at its Paris Games Week announcement. Information on *Spelunky 2* is a little thin on the ground at the moment, with creator Derek Yu declaring, "It exists!". The original game was a fascinatingly difficult side-scrolling roguelike that took you deep into a network of caves. We can expect something similar for its sequel, with Yu stating in a 2017 blogpost, "With *Spelunky 2*, we get a chance to examine in-depth what makes *Spelunky* unique and draw it out even more".



DEATH'S GAMBIT

■ PC, PS4 | ■ White Rabbit | ■ Q2 2018

Much like *Bloodstained*, but much faster, Death's Gambit is a side-on action RPG. Its gorgeous pixel art does a great job in showing off your character's larger-than-life abilities, as well as the gigantic bosses you will end up vanquishing.



CELESTE

■ PC, PS4, Switch | ■ Matt Makes Games | ■ January 2018

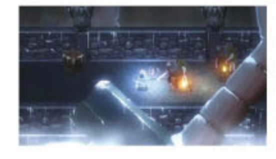
Brought to you by the developer of *Towerfall*, *Celeste* utilises a similar aesthetic and control scheme to its predecessor. Instead of flinging arrows against one another, however, you will be scaling a treacherous mountain using *Celeste*'s mid-air dash ability – think *Ice Climber* meets *Super Meat Boy*.



EITR

■ PC, PS4, Mac | ■ Eneme Entertainment | ■ Q3 2018

It's hard not to be enthralled by *Eitr*'s melancholic visual style and hypnotic animation, and we're hoping it plays as well as it looks. It's an isometric action-RPG with a considered and punishing combat system where you take control of a Norse shieldmaiden and uncover the secrets behind her fate.



CHILDREN OF MORTA

■ PC | ■ Dead Mage | ■ Q4 2018

A top-down hack-and-slash with a difference, *Children of Morta* plants its focus firmly on family. The game plays out like a roguelike Zelda with co-op, and you can expect an intriguing cast of characters that'll support a range of playstyles.



GUACAMELEE 2

■ PS4 | ■ DrinkBox Studios | ■ Q1 2018

DrinkBox's luchador-themed Metroidvania is returning early 2018. The original was fantastic and stood out from its genremates thanks to its undeniable quality, and its sequel is looking to build on its combat, exploration and that undeniable charm – oh, and it'll throw in four-player co-op for good measure.





GRIFTLANDS

■ Klei Entertainment

■ PC | ■ Q2 2018

[4] Everything is negotiable in *Griftlands*, hence its name. In this RPG you take control of a band of mercenaries as you embark on the usual questing fare; what's more interesting is that the world will react to what your group gets up to, appeasing one procedurally generated character could put you in hot water with another, for example. *Griftlands* uses a turn-based combat system, in the vein of early Final Fantasy games with a line-up of characters, however you can, of course, talk your way out of conflicts with a silver tongue.

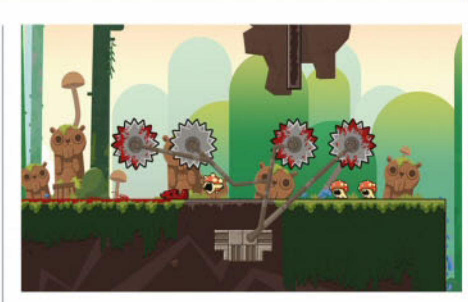


BLOODSTAINED: RITUAL OF THE NIGHT

■ ArtPlay, DICO

■ PC, PS4, Xbox one, Switch | ■ March 2018

[5] Esteemed Castlevania director Koji 'Iga' Igarashi returned to videogames in 2014, after a four-year hiatus, by announcing this spiritual successor to the vampire-slaying series on Kickstarter. The project became one of crowdfunding's biggest success stories, raising $5m more than its $500,000 goal. Bloodstained's design is very much in the mould of the post-*Symphony Of The Night* Castlevania games, and judging by our hands-on with its E3 2016 demo, it will feel at home in the hands of any fan of those games. Castlevania has most definitely returned, in everything but name.



SUPER MEAT BOY FOREVER

■ Team Meat

■ Mobile, PC, PS4, Switch, Xbox One | ■ Q2 2018

[6] What was originally envisioned as a mobile-only version of *Super Meat Boy* quickly snowballed into a fully-fledged sequel. Team Meat returns as developer for *Super Meat Boy Forever*, bringing in a new abilities for Meat Boy and randomly-generated levels. These levels are dynamic and based on the player's own skill, using up different building blocks, or 'chunks', made by the developers. Levels will also be seasoned with regular enemies this time round – think Super Mario's goombas – which Meat Boy can defeat by sliding into them or punching them square in the face.

WHAT'S IN STORE ON SWITCH?

NINTENDO'S EARLY LINE-UP TO FOLLOW AN AMAZING 2017

CAN NINTENDO POSSIBLY HOPE TO MATCH THE YEAR IT HAS JUST HAD WITH THE SWITCH AS WE HEAD INTO 2018? Probably not, but that doesn't mean that what's to come on the Switch is a complete washout. Some of Nintendo's favourite franchises are in the works and primed to keep the universal love of the Switch going for a few more months. These are just a few of the exclusives you can expect and we're sure more third-party games will be winging their way to the system soon.




1

POKÉMON SWITCH

■ Nintendo Switch | ■ Game Freak | ■ TBC 2018

[1] After cries of 'please release *Pokémon Snap* on [Nintendo's newest console]' for years and years, Nintendo has finally listened! Ha, of course it hasn't. You're never getting *Pokémon Snap*, even if the Switch would be perfect for it – imagine, motion-controlled cameras – so it's time to move on, for the moment, to the next Pokémon game – that we know very little about. It's apparently a 'core RPG Pokémon title', which means it won't be a spin-off like *Pokémon Mystery Dungeon*, *Pokémon Stadium*, or *Pokkén Tournament*, but it'll be something more similar to the series from *Red And Blue* all the way through to *Sun And Moon*. The *Pokémon* director has changed from Junichi Masuda to Shigeru Ohmori, who directed *Sun And Moon*, refreshing and revitalising a series that was beginning to grow a little stagnant. Hopefully, the untitled *Pokémon* Switch game will feature some of *Sun And Moon*'s best additions, from regional Pokémon forms, to rideable Pokémon, to captivating Poke-Professors. We don't even know what region it will be in, but there will presumably – as with every Pokémon game so far – be a bunch of new Pokémon. Hopefully we'll find out more at 2018's E3, or in a Nintendo Direct some time soon.

2

KIRBY STAR ALLIES

■ Nintendo Switch | ■ HAL Laboratories | ■ Q1 2018

[2] Kirby is already the most adorable character on Nintendo's roster (sorry, Mario) but it seems like it's trying to make it even more so with the addition of friends. In *Kirby Star Allies*, you can throw hearts at up to three enemies to make them fight alongside you! If you have friends (real-world friends!) you can play co-operatively with them, combining your various powers to create new, unique powers, such as a hot air balloon that's also a bomb, or ice walls that trap your enemy so you can easily take them out. If you enjoyed *Kirby 64: The Crystal Shards* on the Nintendo 64, this is going back to the series' roots, as *Star Allies* is basically the spiritual sequel to that game, plus an incredibly buff King Dedede is the antagonist. If 2017 belonged to *Super Mario Odyssey*'s Wedding Bowser, beefy Dedede is going to own 2018 – and our hearts.



UNTITLED YOSHI GAME

■ Nintendo Switch | ■ Good-Feel | ■ TBC 2018

[3] Did we say Kirby was the cutest character Nintendo had? We lied. It's Yoshi. It's always been Yoshi. The squashy-nosed dinosaur companion was last seen in the absolutely adorable *Yoshi's Woolly World*, and now he's getting his first Switch outing (if you don't count his *Super Mario Odyssey* cameo) with the upcoming untitled *Yoshi* game. Just like *Yoshi's Woolly World*, it's themed around crafts, except rather than wool, this time Yoshi's exploring a cardboard world. It's incredibly detailed and thematically brilliant, with set pieces including cardboard houses and characters made from paper tubes – the whole world looks like it was built by an excitable three year old, albeit a three-year old who knows how to program games. It also looks like there's a two-player mode, with two Yoshis working together to complete levels, take out Shy Guys and grab all the coins they can. As with every Yoshi game, there are tons of secrets and collectibles to be found behind every shrub and tree, whether that's a snoozing enemy or a whole cache of coins. It's just a shame that this charming art style is limited to only Yoshi (and occasionally Kirby) games, as we'd love to see another *Paper Mario* that looks like this.

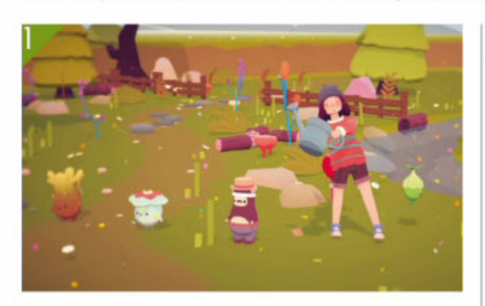
TRAVIS STRIKES AGAIN: NO MORE HEROES

■ Nintendo Switch | ■ Grasshopper Manufacture | ■ TBC 2018

[4] The second sequel to Suda51's cel-shaded, motion-controlled, ultra-violent, action-adventure hack-and-slash (that's a lot of hyphenated words) is coming exclusively to Switch, partly because Suda51 himself thinks that the console is as "revolutionary" as the Wii was in its time. He called the Switch, and Nintendo, "punk" in an interview with Engadget, and talks about all the loving indie-game references to be found in the game, from *Hotline Miami* to *Shovel Knight* (in the trailer, protagonist Travis is actually playing *Hotline Miami*). In typical Suda style, the dialogue is irreverent and self-referential, informing players that the game is made in Unreal Engine and that the man attacking Travis is Badman, the father of Bad Girl, a character from the original *No More Heroes* on Wii who Travis killed during the events of the game. *Travis Strikes Again* occurs seven years after the events of *No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle*, and Travis appears to be in retirement, living in a caravan with his cat. At the end of the trailer, the two get sucked in to Travis's console, the Death Drive MK II – AKA the 'Phantom Game Console', with implications that Badman has been looking for it all this time.

GAMES WE'RE TOO EXCITED ABOUT

WE'LL ADMIT TO BEING A BIT OVER THE TOP, BUT THESE GAMES REALLY DO LOOK AWESOME



OOBLETS

■ Xbox One, PC | ■ Glumberland | ■ TBC 2018

[1] While the core concept alone of *Ooblets*, a game that combines elements of Harvest Moon, Pokémon and Animal Crossing, is piquing our interest, it's really the game's commitment to player expression that makes it super appealing to us. *Ooblets* really wants you to express yourself how you want. It might all be filtered through its super-cute, colourful, charming design, but you're free to make it what you want it to be and that's very cool.





PSYCHONAUTS 2

■ PS4, Xbox One, PC | ■ Double Fine | ■ TBC 2018

[2] Double Fine's long-awaited sequel is coming along rather nicely if its regular crowdfunding updates are to be believed, which they are. Chances are, many of you won't feel any great attachment to the original *Psychonauts*, since it came out in 2005, but this new game promises to be an anarchic, hilarious and devilishly creative action platformer, much like the original, only with all the modern bells and whistles. We love this world and these characters a lot.



SHENMUE III

■ PS4, PC | ■ Ys Net, Neilo | ■ Q3 2018

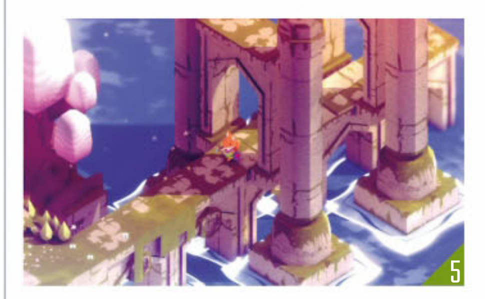
[3] Can we be too excited about the return and conclusion of one of the most respected and groundbreaking role-players in gaming history? Possibly. *Shenmue III* is making its progress a little slowly, but it's getting there and it is staying true to the original vision of Yu Suzuki, which is what really matters to those of us who have been thinking and wishing for this for so many years. The combat and animation are coming along really well. We're desperate to see more.



SESSIONS

■ Xbox One, PC | ■ Crea-ture Studios | ■ TBC 2018

[4] We love the Skate series and, since EA doesn't seem the least bit inclined to bring it back, we're thankful a bunch of the Skate development team has been working on *Sessions*, which recently bust through its funding goal on Kickstarter in about three days. Much like Skate, it focuses on the pure joy of skateboarding, but one new element is an update to the controls that puts the left and right foot control on the left and right analogue sticks of a controller. This should mean super-precise trick control. There's a PC demo out now.



TUNIC

■ PS4, Xbox One, PC | ■ Andrew Shouldice | ■ TBC 2018

[5] While on the surface, *Tunic* looks like a fairly simple homage to classic Zelda, there's more to it than that. For a start, developer Andrew Shouldice is getting to the heart of what makes Zelda games truly great – the sense of discovery. *Tunic* has the trappings of exploration and sword swinging, but it's finding secrets and discovering new things that will keep us pushing on. The physics and animation in the game look fantastic too.





ESPORTS CONTENDERS

CAN ANYTHING CHALLENGE THE LIKES OF CSGO, DOTA2 AND LEAGUE OF LEGENDS?

PLAYER-UNKNOWN'S BATTLE-GROUNDS
Xbox One, PC
Bluehole
Q1 2018

TOTAL WAR: ARENA
PC
Creative Assembly
TBC 2018

BUILD SOMETHING INTERESTING AND THE PLAYERS WILL COME. That's how this industry has a tendency to function. When a developer chooses to let its product out into the wild, it does, to a certain extent at least, become property of the community – a success or failure forged in the fires of Reddit and Steam reviews. The rise of competitive gaming works much in the same way, wherein the most popular games are propelled into the global spotlight and maintained by a player base eager to watch professional gamers play their favourite games at the highest level.

You can't force an esport, that much has been proven in the past, and yet so many developers seem intent on trying. Ubisoft is still trying to draw attention to *Rainbow Six: Siege* while Blizzard is focussed wholeheartedly on establishing *Overwatch* as a viable alternative to other first-person shooters in the scene. It's surprising then, to see Bluehole beginning to shift its attention to competitive gaming with ***PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* [1]** – a game that, in spite of its monstrous success in 2017, is still desperately in need of polish and critical features.

Its early steps into the world of esports, partnered with the likes of ESL – one of the only competitive gaming companies in the world that has the cash flow and infrastructure available to actually establish a setup that sees 100 players fighting off against one another in the same room – has been an interesting experiment. The lack of solid spectator support has proven to be one of the biggest hurdles; with 100 players on the field and with the game's pace built around long stretches of silence and short bursts of chaotic action, it can be difficult to know where (and on who) to focus the lens. That said, it's still thrilling when it works, but there's clearly some huge room for improvement. *PUBG* creator Brendan Greene hasn't been shy about his dream of the game establishing itself as an esport contender and, while the player base to support it is certainly there, the focus needs to remain on optimisation ahead of the game's ascent out of early access (scheduled for early 2018).

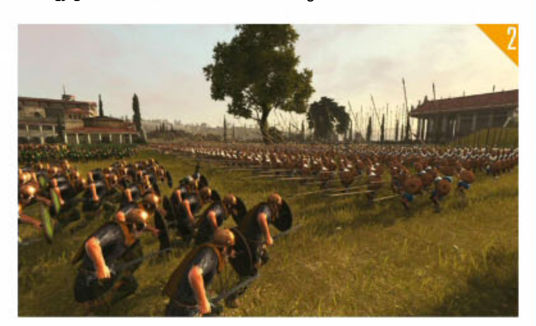
What could be of interest to esport fans looking for something a little different is ***Total War: Arena* [2]**, a game that, despite having a very public, tumultuous development period, is finally emerging as an interesting prospect worth paying attention to. The free-to-play release from Total War maestros Creative Assembly is an RTS/MOBA hybrid that inspires curiosity, pairing back much of the complexity and scale of its namesake into a game that's agile, competitive and inherently team focused. Games play out with teams of ten players – rather than one or two in the traditional main game – with each player tasked with caring for just three units. It's strange, but oddly appealing.

It's easy to see how *Total War: Arena* could inspire some serious competitive players, not to mention rally a crowd around its strategic play. Then there's the partnership with Wargaming to consider. Widely known to be one of the masters of the free-to-play model and market, a lot of attention has been thrown at how Creative Assembly will likely monetise its upcoming hybrid. But that's meant that many have overlooked Wargaming's quiet domination of certain corners of the esports world; *World Of Tanks* is huge and is in command of a loyal player base that follow the competitive game closely. Wargaming will no doubt be closely assessing *Total War: Arena* and the way players respond to it as the game returns to beta.

> "CAN ANY OF THE GAMES RELEASING IN 2018 PUSH INTO THE ESPORTS SCENE IN A BIG WAY?"

Total War: Arena, of course, much like *PUBG*, is in desperate need of polish before any such claims to building an esports community can be made. Consistency is key in this field, and that's largely part of why the likes of Riot, Blizzard and Valve sustained such interest and numbers over the years. Can any of the games releasing in 2018 push into the esports scene in a big way? It seems unlikely. That isn't to say, however, that we aren't super hyped to see exactly how these contenders try to do just that.

■ *Total War: Arena* is such an interesting proposition, offering an easy-to-follow and engaging alternative to other turn-based strategy games.



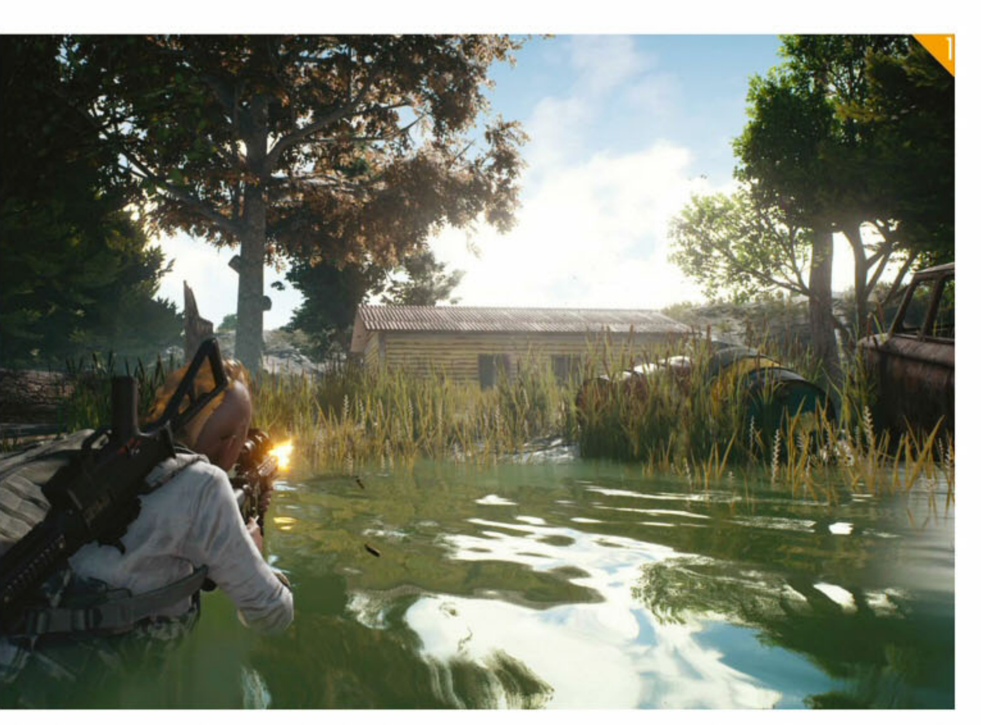


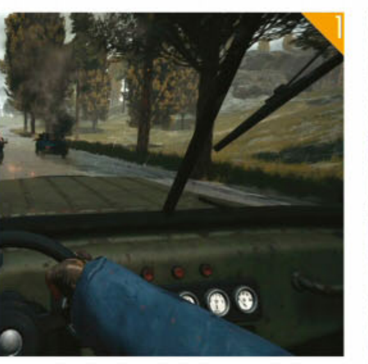


■ *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* might be one of the biggest, most played games in the world right now, but it's future as an esport isn't confirmed.















AN OUTSIDE CHANCE

Three titles that are worth earmarking as potential esports titles for the future

BREAKAWAY



Game development is hard. It's *really* hard. Even hugely promising titles can hit a rough patch, and that's what has happened to Double Helix and Amazon Game Studios' *Breakaway*. The competitive action game is going in to a period of heavy iteration following the closed Alpha that ran over summer 2017, with Double Helix working behind the scenes to ensure this exciting new game not only gets the love it deserves, but also has the systems in place to make a splash on the competitive and spectator scenes when it *does* eventually launch later in the year.

FORTNITE



It's difficult to get a sense of *Fortnite*'s popularity or how large its staying power will ultimately prove to be. Epic's co-op shooter turned Battle Royale experience is still in early access, but it's quickly picking up steam as it fills the *PUBG*-shaped hole in console players' hearts. It's clear after a few months of play time under our belts that it could certainly offer something relatively unique, with the base-building opportunities giving each game a healthy dose of variety. Whether players will flock to it, or watch it competitively, in quite the same way as they have with *PUBG*, however, remains to be seen.

THE DARWIN PROJECT



Scavengers Studio is making a valiant push into spectator sports with *The Darwin Project*, an asymmetrical combat game coming first to Xbox One (and later to PC). Everything about it is designed to pull viewers together, with Microsoft even working closely with the studio to ensure that its interactive spectator mode is ready for launch alongside interactivity through the Mixer streaming platform. The game shares a lot of DNA with Battle Royale titles and Motiga's ill-fated MOBA *Gigantic* – albeit one set in a post-apocalyptic landscape in the Northern Canadian Rockies.

■ Events ■ Anniversaries ■ Release dates

JANUARY

- 8 – *Super Contra* 30 years
- 12 – PAX South (San Antonio, Texas)
- 12 – *Marvel Vs Capcom: Clash Of Super Heroes* 20 years
- 12 – *Panzer Dragoon Orta* (NA) 15 years
- 21 – *Resident Evil 2* 20 years
- 22 – *Burnout Paradise* 10 years
- 22 – *No More Heroes* 10 years
- 25 – games™ 196
- 26 – DreamHack Leipzig (Leipzig, Germany)
- 28 – *Final Fantasy Tactics* 20 years

FEBRUARY

- 2 – *Lost Planet: Extreme Condition* 10 years
- 3 – RTX Sydney (Sydney, Australia)
- 5 – *Devil May Cry 4* 10 years
- 6 – VFX Festival (London, UK)
- 14 – *Game Boy Advanced SP* 15 years
- 17 – PC Gamer Weekender (London, UK)
- 21 – *Star Fox* 25 years
- 22 – games™ 197
- 26 – *Tenchu: Stealth Assassins* 20 years

MARCH

- 4 – *Freelancer* 15 years
- 15 – SXSW Gaming Festival (Austin, Texas)
- 18 – *Enemy Territory: Quake Wars* 10 years
- 18 – *Descent: Freespace – The Great War* 20 years
- 19 – Game Developers Conference (San Francisco, California)
- 22 – games™ 198
- 24 – *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker* (US) 15 years
- 25 – *Need For Speed: Hot Pursuit* 20 years
- 30 – *Marvel Vs Capcom 2: New Age Of Heroes* 15 years
- 30 – *StarCraft* 20 years
- 31 – *1080° Snowboarding* 20 years

APRIL

- 5 – PAX East (Boston, Massachusetts)
- 12 – BAFTA Game Awards (London, UK)
- 13 – *Postal 2* 15 years
- 13 – EGX Rezzed (London, UK)
- 16 – Games Week Denmark (Copenhagen, Denmark)
- 17 – East Coast Game Conference (Raleigh, North Carolina)
- 19 – games™ 199
- 30 – *Panzer Dragoon Saga* 20 years

MAY

- 12 – *Gran Turismo* 20 years
- 14 – *Enter The Matrix* 15 years
- 17 – games™ 200

MAY
STAR WARS (ARCADE)
35 YEARS

JUNE

- 6 – *The Legend Of Zelda: Link's Awakening* 25 years
- 11 – *X-Men Vs. Street Fighter* 20 years
- 12 – *MGS4: Guns Of The Patriots* 10 years
- 12 – E3 (LA, California)
- 14 – games™ 201
- 14 – *Mario Bros.* 35 years
- 26 – *Viewtiful Joe* (Jpn) 15 years
- 29 – *Banjo Kazooie* 20 years

JUNE
SPACE INVADERS (ARCADE)
35 YEARS

JUNE
MANIAC MANSION: DAY OF THE TENTACLE
25 YEARS

	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER	OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER
1			*Super Mario Bros. 2 (US)* 30 years	*Body Harvest* 20 years	games™ 206	*Zelda II: The Adventure Of Link* 30 years
2						
3						*Star Wars: Rogue Squadron* 20 years
4				games™ 205		
5						
6		*Braid* 10 years; *Secret Of Mana* 25 years	*Master Of Orion* 25 years; games™ 204			
7				*Ridge Racer* 25 years	*Gears Of War 2* 10 years	
8						
9		games™ 203	*Parasite Eve* 20 years; *Spyro The Dragon* 20 years			
10	Develop Brighton (Brighton, UK)				*Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time* 15 years	
11					*Banjo-Kazooie: Nuts & Bolts* 10 years; *Call Of Duty: World At War* 10 years; *Mirror's Edge* 10 years; *Beyond Good & Evil* 15 years	
12	games™ 202	SIGGRAPH (Vancouver, Canada)				DECEMBER *VIRTUA FIGHTER* 25 YEARS
13				*World Of Goo* 10 years		
14	*F-Zero X* 20 years	*Bionic Commando Rearmed* 10 years		*Dead Space* 10 years		
15	*Famicom (Jpn)* 35 years				*ClayFighter* 25 years	
16		JUNE *ALTERED BEAST* 30 YEARS	*Battle Fantasia* 10 years			
17	*Star Wars: Knights Of The Old Republic* 15 years; *Boktai: The Sun Is In Your Hand (Jpn)* 15 years			*Oddworld: Abe's Exoddus* 20 years		
18						
19		*Too Human* 10 years			*Half-Life* 20 years	
20	*Bionic Commando* 30 years		EGX (Birmingham, UK); Tokyo Game Show (Tokyo, Japan)		*Tomb Raider III* 20 years	
21		Gamescom (Cologne, Germany); *Tom Clancy's Rainbow Six* 20 years		*Metal Gear Solid* 20 years		*Baldur's Gate* 20 years
22						
23			*Sonic CD* 25 years	*Fable II* 10 years; *Crimson Skies: High Road To Revenge* 15 years; *Super Mario Bros. 3* 30 years	*The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time* 20 years	*Sonic Adventure* 20 years
24						*Mega Man 2* 30 years
25						
26						
27						games™ 208
28				*Fallout 3* 10 years; *LittleBigPlanet* 10 years		
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30			*Fallout 2* 20 years	*Grim Fandango* 20 years	*Thief: The Dark Project* 20 years	
31				*SiN* 20 years		



WHY I ❤...

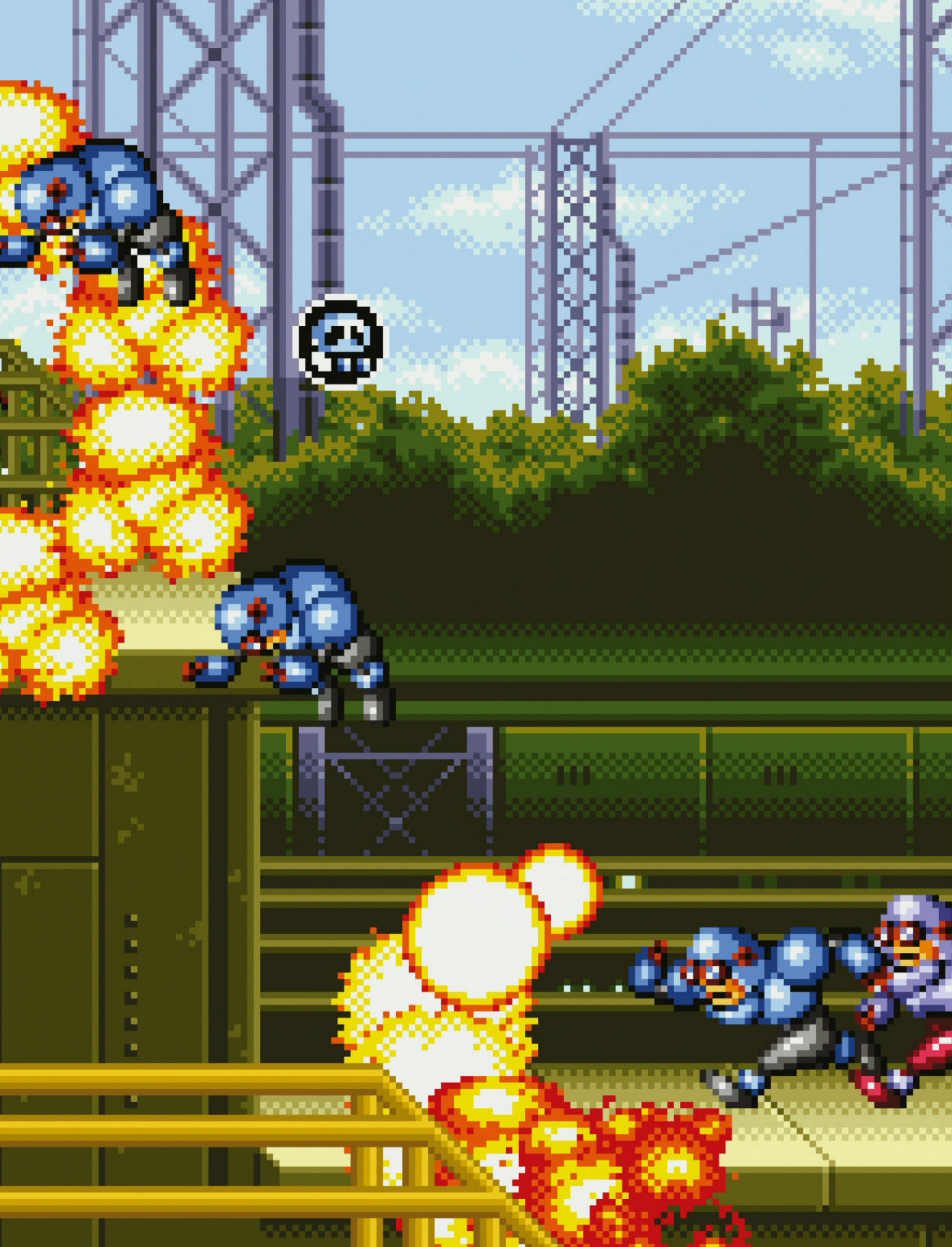
GUNSTAR HEROES

GLEN SCHOFIELD
CEO, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES

I love a lot of games, and if you ask me my favourite game I just don't know it. There's one every generation; the Uncharted *games, before that,* Mario Sunshine*… there's just so many great games! I'm a giant fan of* Resident Evil 4 *as well, it was a big influence on* Dead Space*… newer games like* Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare*, which came out while I was at another company – I was at EA – and it absolutely blew me away. My Bond game [*From Russia With Love*] was coming around the same time, and my heart went into my stomach because I knew they had just broken the mould, they had just created something great. That was a watershed moment.*

But I really should go back to the early days of the Genesis, when I was playing so many co-op games. One of my favourite games of all times is Gunstar Heroes*. It's a Japanese game, and it was the first time I ever saw 100/100 given to a game; it's not quite as cool now, but I must have played it over a hundred times through. It's a great game.*

> "If you ask me my favourite game I just don't know it. There's one every generation"
> GLEN SCHOFIELD, CEO, SLEDGEHAMMER GAMES





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Reviews



72

STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Beyond the controversy and the spectacle, has EA managed to make the Star Wars shooter that we've all been wanting to play?

THE AVERAGE

Three of the numbers in a ten-point scale are of greater importance than the others: five, seven, and, of course, ten Some publications would fool you into believing that a 7/10 game is average, but that just doesn't make sense to us **games™** reviews videogames on their entertainment value, and so any title that simply performs to an adequate standard will receive a 5/10 Simple The elusive ten is reserved for games of incredible, irrefutable quality, but please be aware that a score of ten in no way professes to mean perfection Perfection is an unattainable goal, and on a ten-point scale nothing should be unattainable Again, simple Our reviews are not a checklist of technical features with points knocked off for flaws, neither are they a PR-pressured fluff-fest We'd never let that happen, and besides, you'd smell it a mile off Finally, the reviews you find within these pages are most certainly not statements of fact They are the opinions of schooled, knowledgeable videogame journalists designed to enlighten, inform and engage – the gospel according to **games™**.















AGREE/DISAGREE?

games™ is always right But that doesn't stop some people disagreeing Think we've got a review horribly wrong? Or did we nail it?

Let us know through the following channels:



@gamesTMmag
#gamestmiswrong #gamestmisright



Above: The look of these multiplayer maps is actually a little insane. DICE has gone to staggering lengths to capture the finer detail in each of its environments.

SEQUELS ARE BUILT ON HOPE

Star Wars Battlefront II

This is almost everything that a good sequel is supposed be; much of the loudest criticism was not only heard, but acted upon. EA addressed the lack of a single-player campaign by putting Motive Studios on the case, a brand-new studio created to oversee production of the publisher's Star Wars games. The furore surrounding the lack starship battles was solved by giving Criterion Games a far larger part to play in production, while concerns surrounding the lack of content, troubled implementation of vehicles and heroes, and general lack of enjoyable career progression was to be overhauled by DICE, all as it looked to get *Star Wars Battlefront II* on shelves and in fighting shape ahead of the release of the next movie in the series, *The Last Jedi*.

That all sounded great on paper. The reality of the situation is that *Battlefront II* is a bad sequel. The single-player campaign starts strongly enough but quickly derails itself, seemingly too concerned with nostalgia baiting to properly grasp hold of the unique opportunity it had created for itself in the canon over its five-hour run time. The addition of character classes, deeper customisation, and career progression is misguided at best, manipulative at its worst; the concerns surrounding content addressed by drawing from 40 years of Star Wars history, and yet restrained by staggeringly poor decisions made in regards to map rotation, game mode implementation, and a confusing upgrade and levelling system. The Starship battles are, admittedly, a welcome addition and excellent in their execution, but ultimately hampered by many of the above problems.

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PS4, PC
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: DICE, Motive, Criterion
PRICE: £54.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-40
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

DICE IS STILL YET TO PROPERLY INCENTIVISE OBJECTIVE AND SQUAD-BASED PLAY ON CONSOLE

Battlefront II has also failed to address the most critical feedback that was levied at the 2015 release: the game itself simply isn't fun to play for extended periods of time. DICE has once again attempted to build a game that captures the spirit and feel of the Star Wars universe – of its tantalising scenarios and thunderous battles – in a way that is accessible to all, as enticing to casual fans of the franchise as it is hardcore Battlefield veterans. Unsurprisingly, those elements simply do not play well together.

Much like its predecessor, there's something magical about your first steps into this experience. *Battlefront II* is a true technical achievement – a testament to the talent and dedication of so many working behind the scenes. It is an audio and visual delight, with DICE delivering an unprecedented level of detail in its assets that bring everything to life; the sprawling multiplayer battles, cast out across 17 maps, many of which hold up to 40 players, immediately capture the sense

FAQs

Q. SO, THE MONETISATION…?

Yup, EA listened and removed the premium currency and premium loot boxes from the game. They are being assessed before eventual re-implementation.

Q. …RUINED THE GAME, RIGHT?

Well, no. *Battlefront II* has plenty of problems. Monetisation systems are actually the least of the problems with respect to career progression, upgrade and unlock systems.

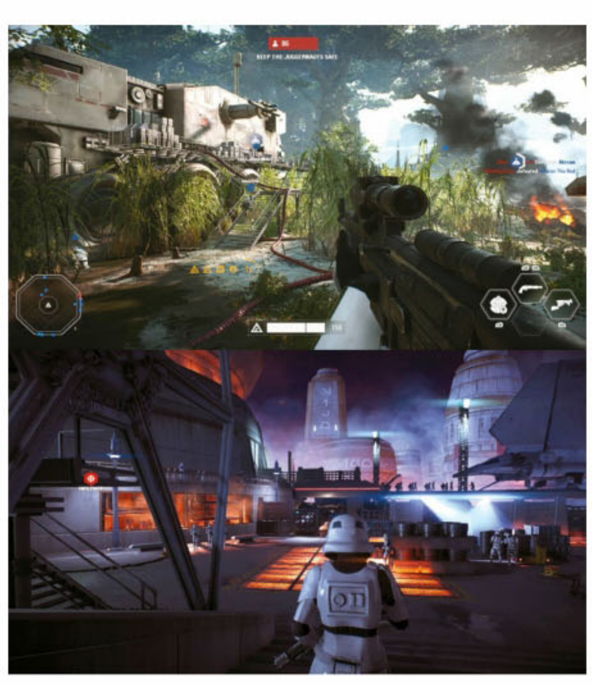
Q. SO IT'S GOOD VALUE NOW?

Debatable. There's a lot of content here, but much of it is still locked behind barriers that are relatively difficult to break down.



Left: The starship battles do perhaps the best job of capturing everything you'd want to see and feel from a Star Wars game. They are big on spectacle, but fast and fun to engage in. Somebody give Criterion the *Star Wars: Rogue Leader* franchise already.





MOTIVE CAME CLOSE

The single-player campaign was almost exactly what it needed to be. While the general moment-to-moment play suffers from the same handling and feedback issues present in the multiplayer, it feels less pronounced here in the paced mission structures. Writers Walt Williams and Mitch Dyer clearly have a concise and clear command of the Star Wars universe, and the characters that inhabit it, but we can't help but feel as if time would have been better spent in the company of Iden Versio and Inferno Squad, rather than shifting focus to various heroes whose stories have yet to be told within the 30-year gap between *Return Of The Jedi* and *The Force Awakens*. The heroes are not fun to control, their stories uninteresting (despite the characters being well written) and we'd have rather seen the entire game focused on Iden's struggle with the Dark Side rather than her valuable screen time eaten up by nostalgia.

AS GOOD AS — STAR WARS: REPUBLIC COMMANDO



WORSE THAN — STAR WARS: BATTLEFRONT



of scale and place of Star Wars' most famous locations. And it's true, there is magic in those first steps out into Hoth once again, the crunch of ice-white snow underfoot likely to summon a smile much in the same way *The Empire Strikes Back* achieves in its opening scenes time and time again. But that magic wanes with each subsequent step; *Battlefront II* is another showcase as to why it's perhaps best if Star Wars' battles are left to the actors, animators and illustrators of this world.

There are some clear improvements here, however the overall package feels like something crucial is missing. The controls are, largely, far more responsive in both third and first-person perspectives. That is sadly tempered by a surprising lack of weapon feedback and options for survivability; the weapons don't feel good to wield, your options on the battlefield surprisingly limited. Star Wars always promoted big, blusterous battles on screen and the reality of that ensures that they aren't exactly fun to engage directly in.

Galactic Assault – *Battlefront II*'s signature 40-player multiplayer mode – fails to grasp a hold of its core potential, on touring you across the galaxy, and by forcing some strange map rotation concessions into play. The games take too long, the thought of replaying a map from the rival side too much to bare for many players – the drop rate between rounds is, frankly, a little out of control. It doesn't help that issues surrounding spawn point placement have made a return, particularly on some of the larger maps, a frustration that ultimately wears away the protective shielding of your nostalgia.

Galactic Assault and the small Strike experience (both focused on successfully completing shifting mission parameters as a team rather than leaderboard K/D ascension) are also quickly turned into living nightmares as players seem incapable of playing the objective. The blame for this can't be placed wholly on the developer but this is a familiar complaint, and something of a running joke: when it comes to Battlefield – a clear conclusion to draw here is that DICE is still yet to properly incentivise objective and squad-based play on console.

FINGERPRINT

WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

TOTAL RECALL: *Battlefront II* draws from all corners of the established Star Wars universe, delivering fan-service 40 years in the making.

Looking broadly at the package, it's easy to be impressed. *Battlefront II* looks beautiful, it sounds amazing, and will likely appease the casual Star Wars fan that's always wanted to live out the fantasy of crashing a T-47 airspeeder into the side of an AT-AT or 74-Z speeder bike into trees as Ewoks look on. But the gunplay is too bland, the career and upgrade system too aggressively confusing – shackled to a loot box/progression system that seems to actively balk at any of the lessons learned by the world's biggest multiplayer shooters and developers over the last decade – to ever really impress for more than a fleeting moment. *Battlefront II* is fan service and little else; much respect to the craft, the attention to detail and the wealth of content, but sadly it just isn't enough. It's starting to feel as if Star Wars simply isn't a franchise suitable for this type of sprawling, large-scale multiplayer experience. It doesn't have it in its bones, and if DICE can't find a way to make it work, we're fearful nobody can.



THIS ISN'T THE GAME YOU'RE LOOKING FOR

DOES THE SERIES NEED REBUILDING?

LEGO Marvel Super Heroes 2

DETAILS

FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC, PS4, Switch
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Warner Bros
DEVELOPER: Traveller's Tales
PRICE: £39.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-4
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

Following the Marvel Cinematic Universe is all well and good, but we prefer it when developers are allowed to have a little fun with famous heroes and tell their own stories. It's something that the first *LEGO Marvel Super Heroes* title did brilliantly in 2013, and the sequel goes even further. Borrowing and tweaking a storyline from Marvel's summer event, the plot revolves around Kang the Conqueror, who is using time-bending powers to bring together multiple time periods in a single Kingdom – Chronopolis – with him as its all-powerful leader. This massive area makes up the game's hub world, and there's a mass to see. One minute you'll be swooping over pyramids from ancient Egypt, the next you'll be in Nueva York, the future version of Manhattan, then Wakanda, then Asgard, then the Old West. The variety is excellent, and there are small, neat touches all over the place.

The main story explores all of these areas, and follows the classic LEGO template. You'll enter a level with a preset group of heroes, then partake in some light puzzling, platforming and fighting to achieve your objective. As always, the puzzles are simple, but working out what you actually need to do to solve them can be confusing – we spent a frustrating few minutes trying to to solve a problem more than once.

Reach the end and you'll face off against a boss plucked from Marvel's villain gallery – but these fights certainly won't match up to the epic battles you see on the cinema screens. Usually they boil down to beating up grunts by mashing the attack button until the boss becomes susceptible to damage, at which point you run over to them and… mash the attack button. It's not surprising (this is a LEGO game, after all) but it's a shame that only a few of these bosses have a unique tactic for being taken down.

The story takes you through 20 levels, but that's only the start. Each of the levels has plenty of secrets to uncover in free play mode and then there's the main hub, which is littered with objective markers. Save locals, rescue the many LEGO Stan Lees around Chronopolis, find new characters… there's so much to do that when we finished the main story our progress only showed around 35 per cent.

The question is whether you have the patience for it all. Ultimately, these games are designed with younger players in mind, and for them, this is sure to thrill. It has a huge hero roster, laugh-out-loud moments and the gameplay loop is perfect for kids. If you're playing alongside a younger gamer, you'll probably have a blast. For more experienced players, you may find yourself putting the pad down long before you get close to the 100 per cent mark.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

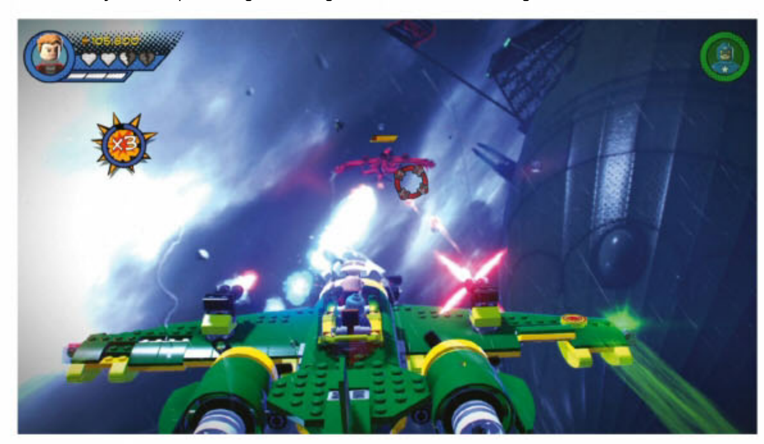
PURE EVIL: Kang himself is voiced by actor Peter Serafinowicz, and he is excellent, lending real depth and seriousness to the role.

BETTER THAN: LEGO DIMENSIONS

WORSE THAN: LEGO MARVEL SUPER HEROES

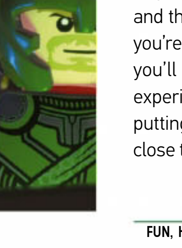


Above: The city of Chronopolis is huge, well designed and has hundreds of things to find and do.









Above: The Fantastic Four are notably absent from the cast, but there are still hundreds of heroes to unlock.

VERDICT 6/10

FUN, HEROIC STUFF, ESPECIALLY FOR YOUNGER PLAYERS



Below: While the game initially does well at handing out Leaf Tickets for completing challenges in-game, this quickly dries up. What we're saying is, don't waste them all early game trying to build an entire soundstage setup… it isn't worth it.







DETAILS

FORMAT: iOS
OTHER FORMATS: Android
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Nintendo
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: Free-to-Play
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

MIITOMO



FIRE EMBLEM HEROES

WORSE THAN

MAKE A BELL, SPEND A DOLLAR

Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp

***Animal Crossing* should have been the perfect Nintendo series for mobile.** Since its debut it has always benefited from players engaging with it in small doses, of making short (but regular) trips back to the homestead to catch up with friends, cleaning up any messes that arrived in your absence, and completing a litany of busywork jobs in an effort to crawl out of the debt hell Tom Nook ensnares you in the second you begin putting down roots. When it comes to Animal Crossing, the game is in the grind; the satisfaction found in the comforting embrace of its routine – it's basically real life, only here you can effectively pay off your mortgage by collecting fruit and all of your neighbours are anthropomorphic animals. We take some comfort in that.

That routine has effectively made its way to mobile in the form of *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp*, but its magic is missing in the conversion. That's partly down to what could be seen as aggressive monetisation systems on Nintendo's part, and partly down to the game encouraging constant bursts of your attention while giving very little back in reward. Timers have been placed on almost every activity, the demand of your time made with a push notification; the tempered, methodical pace of the game upended by scalable metrics, the routine shattered by the notion that you can have anything you want, whenever you want it, so long as you're willing to pay. Basically, what we're saying is that *Animal Crossing* is likely reflecting the mindset and spending patterns of the new generation – just as it did for us back in 2001 – only we're old and we don't necessarily like it.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

CORE LOOP: The game loop feels out of sync with the experience. *Pocket Camp* needs to detach its core activities from timers.

And listen, sure Animal Crossing has always been rooted heavily in the idea of capitalism, but it's never been so aggressively implemented. Want the fruit to grow faster or K.K. Slider to come chill in your campsite? There's a payment plan for that, and it's called Leaf Tickets. Want to cycle out some of the loser animals to quickly make new friends, or complete construction quickly on a big project to appease one particular new pal before they head off in search of new adventures? Don't worry, a few tickets will get that sorted for you. There's an immediacy to *Animal Crossing: Pocket Camp* that hasn't existed in previous games in the series. Have you ever met anybody that has decried Amazon Prime because they believe they shouldn't have to wait *one whole day* for their delivery? This game is that person personified.

Pocket Camp has impressively captured the sights and sounds of Animal Crossing. It's a delight to immerse yourself in the world, of course, but it doesn't feel like a game built for sustained play or long-lasting enjoyment. There's a cynicism to its core design that feels unnatural to the series (and that's saying something). *Pocket Camp* isn't a disaster, nor is it a mistake – you'll likely have some fun with it in fits and bursts – but it doesn't have the charm, appeal or staying power of its predecessors.

VERDICT 5/10

LOOKS THE PART, BUT DOESN'T HAVE THE SOUL

MESSI PRECISION, GAZZA EMOTION

Football Manager 2018

The cult of the football manager grows ever stronger. Pep Guardiola moves closer to become a religious symbol with each passing game, Alex Ferguson and Bill Shankly are already there and Jose Mourinho continues to draw plaudits and wrath in unequal measure. David Moyes is, of course, the immortal court jester that any realm of self-respecting, self-aggrandising demi-gods needs.

The cult of Football Manager grows stronger too, thanks to a constant stream of meaningful tweaks and additions to the exquisitely complex and pure formula at its core. Those positive changes are out in force again this season, meaning there's never been less of an excuse for followers of the beautiful game to set about replicating in digital the real-world achievements of their idols.

Players in this 2018 edition come with greater emotional intelligence, the tactics system has been reworked to be more in-depth and easier to understand, transfers and contract negotiations have been brought more in-line with reality and, as a rule, the entire package is more intelligently presented and less overbearing for newcomers. *Football Manager 2018* is the best armchair gaffer creator the series has yet seen.

'Dynamics' is the name given to all things relating to player emotions, interpersonal skills and social groups within the squad, the concept acting as the year's headline feature. Through Dynamics you can gain insight into who the club's most influential players are, who hangs out with who on days off and understand how happy the team are with each other, with you and with a range of things relating to training and level of performance.

Through this greater awareness you are more able to make intelligent decisions by taking into account the emotional state of each player, as well as the team in general. The effect is that each player enjoys a greatly heightened sense of individuality, making

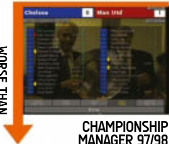
DETAILS

FORMAT: PC
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sports Interactive
PRICE: £37.99
RELEASE: Out Now
PLAYERS: 1-16
MINIMUM SPEC: Pentium 4, Intel Core or AMD Athlon – 2.2 GHz, 2GB RAM, Intel GMA X4500 or better, DirectX 9.0c, 7GB
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

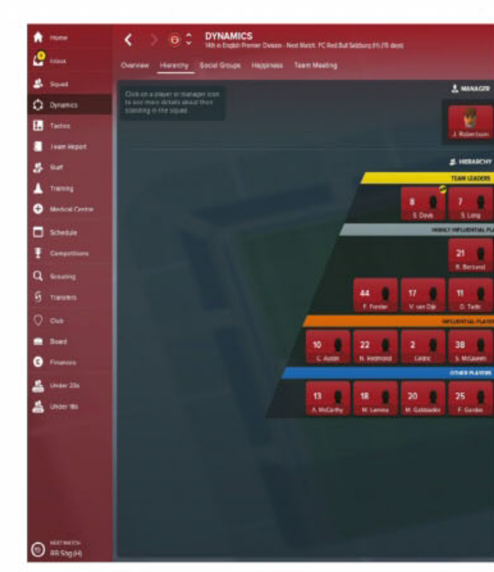
FOOTBALL MANAGER 2017





WORSE THAN

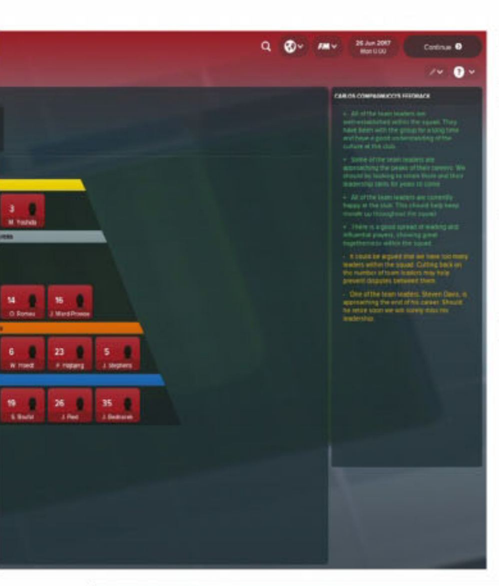
CHAMPIONSHIP MANAGER 97/98



Above: Understanding the hierarchy of influence at your club is essential to fostering a healthy dressing atmosphere. Annoy the players at the top of the pyramid and, due to their lofty status amongst teammates, you're running the risk of flaming the fires of revolt.

Below: As ever, signing the best 'Wonderkids' is crucial for building a team capable of sustaining itself at the top of footballing pyramid. If you can afford him, Gianluigi Donnarumma is one of the game's best young talents.

PLAYERS IN THIS 2018 EDITION COME WITH GREATER EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE



FAQs

Q. MOST SURPRISING ELEMENT?
Players can come out as gay in the game, which is fairly uncommon in the real sport right now, but hopefully something that will change.

Q. WHO SHOULD I PLAY AS?
Ask us and we'll say AC Milan. Restore them to their former glory using the new talent they've added recently.

Q. PORTSMOUTH FOR THE CHAMPIONS LEAGUE?
If you can win it then you deserve a plaque in your honour at Fratton Park. Let us know if you do it.

Below: Team line-ups are now presented as part of the pre-match build-up, bringing the match day experience closer to that of a TV presentation.



them feel more like humans, as opposed to mere digital spectres to be used and thrown away as they have been in previous games.

Much of what is observable within Dynamics has been part of *Football Manager* for a number of seasons, but it's been hidden away in algorithms working away behind the scenes. By bringing it to the surface Sports Interactive has succeeded in making you think about more than tactics and training schedules; the emotional layer affecting each of the physical demands you put on your players and, most crucially, affording you more chance to craft a team in your image purely through your skills as both motivator and psychologist.

On the flip side, you have less excuse than ever to be tactically unprepared. *Football Manager 2018*'s tactical screens have been reworked to make the entire process of defining your team's modus operandi more intuitive than ever.

ENHANCED

IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

EMOTIONAL: Football is as much about feeling as it is about goals and tactics and, with the addition of Dynamics, *Football Manager 2018* does feeling better than any sports game.

For starters, a new grid overlay has been added to the tactics pitch that shows you where your current system is lacking in coverage. A red square on the pitch means the tactic you've designed is failing to adequately control that area, whilst green shading indicates the opposite.

The idea is to make it easier at a glance to understand where you might be weak and what you might want to think about before a match begins, which is enormously helpful if you're new to this series and/or not au fait with the finer elements of the sport in general. What the grid doesn't do is tell you explicitly how to go about fixing any troubles with your team – it is still your job to overcome any deficiencies without creating new ones elsewhere.

Implementing tactics changes is more intuitive in that the wider systems relating to team structure and movement are now found on their own screens, separate from those in which you give each player their own set of instructions. This might sound like a minor alteration from previous years, but the reduction in information crammed into each section makes making your selections and understanding quickly what you've got to work with a much more inviting task.

In a game as heavy on information and menu screens as *Football Manager*, it really is impossible to understate just how meaningfully well-thought through modifications to the presentation of data can impact your experience in a positive way.

Elsewhere, transfers and contract negotiations have been altered – most notably in how inflated the transfer market has become in a bid to mimic the astronomical price raises we've seen in real life this past year. New clauses in transfer payment terms have been brought in to allow you more flexibility in avoiding falling foul of financial fair play rules, and you can even loan a player for a season before buying them the next (as PSG are doing this season with Kylian Mbappe) in an attempt to not go over budget.

All of this brings the act of managing closer to that of reality, from the nitty gritty of financial accounting to the more holistic task of keeping players emotionally stable and motivated. In all, there's a lot more to think here than in year's past and, on both an emotional and technical level, that results in you feeling more like a genuine football manager than you ever have. Considering the extreme quality this series has achieved over the years, that is no small achievement.



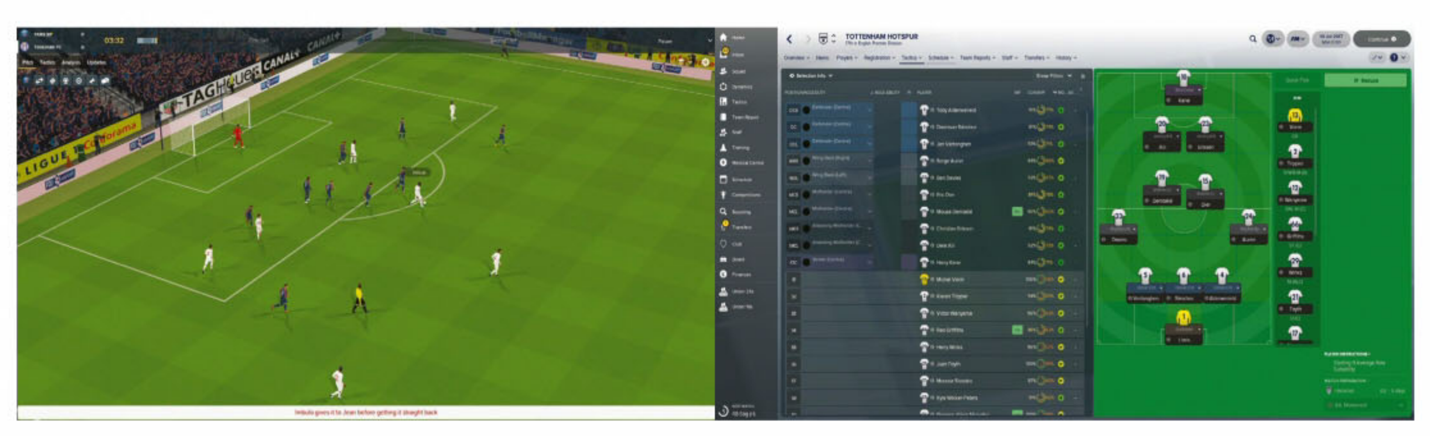
THE BEST AND MOST HUMAN FM TO DATE.

BACKROOM SIGNINGS

Two new staff roles have been added to the mix this season in the form of the data analyst and sports scientist, giving you more to think about and more to control.

Sports scientists work as part of your medical team and are specifically focused on reducing the likelihood of a player constantly picking up the same injury throughout his career. Hire good ones if you want to avoid the kind of problems Daniel Sturridge and Ilkay Gungodan are currently going through.

Data analysts are an extension of your scouting team and work to identify the tactical trends of upcoming opponents, as well as provide a breakdown of your own team's tendencies (for better or worse).





Detective Becky Marney is already under scrutiny, but she's determined to locate the Trapper Killer. How far will you push to close the case?

CAN YOU CATCH THE TRAPPER KILLER?

Hidden Agenda

***Hidden Agenda* succeeds in demonstrating the delicacy of real-life decisions and how they would affect a criminal investigation.** Unfortunately, in doing so, Supermassive Games has also highlighted some of the downsides of developing a story-driven game with multiple plot alterations. While *Hidden Agenda* goes beyond the regular standard of just a handful of multiple endings, its complicated structure doesn't necessarily entice us to continue replaying the game until we achieve the preferred ending. We were initially impressed by the concept of our actions influencing chunks of the story, but it soon became apparent when parts of the plot were missing.

Across multiple playthroughs, many of the conversations felt prematurely clipped, which resulted in the story feeling awkward. Twitchy character animations and out-of-place narration further contributed to us feeling disconnected. On occasion, game-changing dialogue choices were poorly labelled and misleading, which led us to opting for a decision we had so carefully tried to avoid. Considering that the only way to go back and experience other versions of the story is by sitting through another full playthrough, these instances were very frustrating.

Despite the fact that *Hidden Agenda* has supposedly been developed with multiplayer in mind, the Competitive Mode is poorly implemented. 'Takedowns' have been included to avoid standoffs, but when playing with an even party, we were forced to compromise very often. The Hidden Agenda system frequently challenged us to play with specific intentions, encouraging us to make certain decisions if we wanted to score points against our opponents. This continuous disruption to the story didn't elevate the experience at all, and there was little challenge in deducing who had a Hidden Agenda in each round.

Utilising PlayLink via the *Hidden Agenda* App has enabled Supermassive Games to give us access to more information, which we can browse through at our leisure. Nonetheless, the DualShock 4 is still greatly missed here. Executing QTEs can be unreliable in the app, and finding all timed clues was made near-impossible thanks to the processing time between locating a clue, and being able to drag the cursor to search for more. Playing *Hidden Agenda* using a DualShock 4 would have eliminated the majority of the issues that we encountered with the controls, but unfortunately no support has been included.

With strong characters and a twisted plot, this game is a respectable substitute for a crime-thriller movie night. It lacks any substantial cause of replayability after a couple of runs, but still has an impressively malleable string of events that transcend other titles in the genre. Our preferred way of working through *Hidden Agenda*'s complex story was easily the Story Mode, as this left every decision in our hands and kept the tutorial disruptions to a minimum.

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
ORIGIN: UK
PUBLISHER: Sony Interactive Entertainment Europe
DEVELOPER: Supermassive Games
PRICE: £15.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1-6
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

BETTER THAN

TOKYO DARK

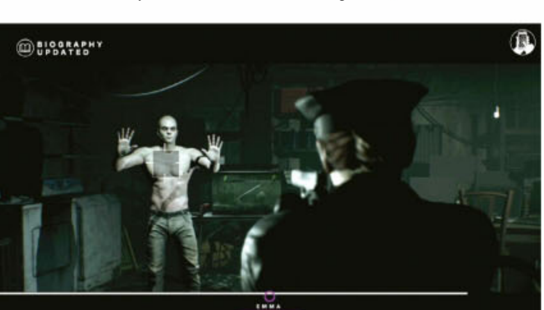


WORSE THAN



THE WALKING DEAD: A NEW FRONTIER





MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

ACCESSING OTHER CHOICES: The option to watch the cutscenes we missed would have been much appreciated. The story is relatively strong, but replayability begins to wear thin after a few playthroughs.

VERDICT 5/10

A GOOD ALTERNATIVE TO A MOVIE NIGHT.

THE ESSENTIAL 2D FIGHTING SENSATION OF THE GENERATION!

UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH

Exe:Late[st]

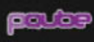
The deep darkness of the hollow night. New shells of incarnation alight.
One swing of a sword. Sinuous white snake. Savage fangs of the beast.
Tonight, the deepest night. Blessing for all who confronts...

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GRINDING THROUGH THE RAT RACE

Need For Speed Payback

Sometimes a game should just work. There's a gap in the market for a game of its kind, the developers have made the right noise and in the end, what's been shown looks like fun. That was true of *Need For Speed Payback*. It should have been a great arcade racer, which are a rarity right now; it should have benefited from Ghost Games having taken a year off; and with a focus on modern *Fast And Furious*-like frolics, it should be a delightful jaunt of racing and revenge. Sadly, *Need For Speed Payback* is none of these things. Instead, it's a reminder that even though something looks like it should be a slam dunk, it can quickly turn into bitter disappointment.

Taking place in Fortune Valley (a fictional stand-in for Las Vegas), the game initially puts you in the shoes of Tyler, 'the city's best racer'. You're also quickly thrust into the roles of the rest of his crew: Mac, a London expat, and Jess, a prickly getaway driver. When trying to steal a supercar, they're betrayed by 'The House', a shadowy organisation that runs the city, and thus a tale of revenge is set. It's pretty nonsensical stuff brought down further by the fact the characters that fill the roles of this revenge plot are insufferable. They exist in the uncanny valley that occurs when a corporate entity tries to simulate 'cool'. They feel fake and worse, they're impossible to escape with the cutscenes, long passages of dialogue in races and off-hand comments to themselves while driving. To really put the nail in the carburettor, it's all performed with the conviction of voice actors who seem to be unsure if these lines are meant to be spoken by actual human beings.

The characters would be bearable if the driving was good enough to distract you, but it largely isn't. There certainly is a thrill in performing a good drift around a corner at 140MPH, but that's about as good as it gets. Where it's dragged down is in the feeling of racing other cars. Instead of a test of speed against AI, it often feels like you're racing against a director who's controlling the flow of the race. You can come to a complete stop, putting you at a significant distance behind a pack of racers, only to find you've caught back up in a couple turns. On the flipside, you can lead for long periods of time, only to find yourself being overtaken by someone after having made no major mistake. There can be merit to this kind of design, but when the seams are as obvious to see as they are in *Payback*, it feels like cheap trickery.



Above: Police chases return, but only in certain events. They can be a fair bit of fun and while not too difficult, their formations and aggressiveness can get the better of you if you're not careful.

MISSING LINK

WHAT WE WOULD CHANGE

LOST DETAILS: Though it offers good variety, the world of Fortune Valley does not hold up to closer inspection. Visually, the game can look bland, especially in dense urban areas.

The structure of *Payback* might be its most infuriating problem. It begins with a story mission before tasking you with taking down three to four racing crews. These gangs can specialise in street, off-road, drift and drag racing. Tyler and Mac will have to race between four and six races to beat a crew, while Jess will be off doing pickups and police getaways. Once you do the required events, you will get a new story mission and then a new set of gangs – rinse and repeat. To be able to compete reliably, your car has to be a certain level and to achieve that level, you need to upgrade your cars with Speed Cards. Speed Cards are rewarded when you win races or buy them from certain locations. If you can't get your level high enough, you either need to go back and do races you've already won or get another form of lootbox called 'Shipments' which you earn when you level up (or, of course, through microtransactions). These have Part Tokens, and you can use three of them for the chance at a better Speed Card. It's a convoluted mess based on two loot systems, relying on either grinding out races you've already won or possibly easing the grind by buying a few Shipments with real money.

On top of that, as you get later in the game, the cars you've been using will not be able to level up to the required levels. Thus you'll need to sell them and buy new cars, which come at a level much lower than you've already achieved, meaning you'll have to grind those up to the required level again. It's a horrendous matryoshka doll of gates and systems built to blockade the player. The play just isn't anywhere near good enough to ask this level of repetition of those playing.

INSTEAD OF A TEST OF SPEED AGAINST AI, IT OFTEN FEELS LIKE YOU'RE RACING AGAINST A DIRECTOR WHO'S CONTROLLING THE FLOW OF THE RACE

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Sweden
PUBLISHER: EA
DEVELOPER: Ghost Games
PRICE: £49.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1 (4-8 online)
ONLINE REVIEWED: Yes

BETTER THAN

BIG RIGS: OVER THE ROAD RACING





FORZA HORIZON 3

WORSE THAN

IT'S ALL ABOUT 'THE LOOK'

Since the days of *Need for Speed: Underground*, the franchise has been synonymous with ludicrous car modification. From spoilers to garish decals to underglow, the series embraced everything loud about street racing. *Payback* does that, but like everything, it requires a lot of effort. The visual editor is extensive, with almost Photoshop levels of precision, meaning you can really make a car your own. However, it's so deep, it will take a while to make something you love. When you're changing cars often and selling them for new ones, it often doesn't feel worth the effort. Add that you have to unlock the ability to modify different parts of your car and things like tire smoke colour being locked behind Shipments, *Payback*'s visual customisation options feel like another chore.



FAQs

Q. ARE THERE ANY MICROTRANSACTIONS?

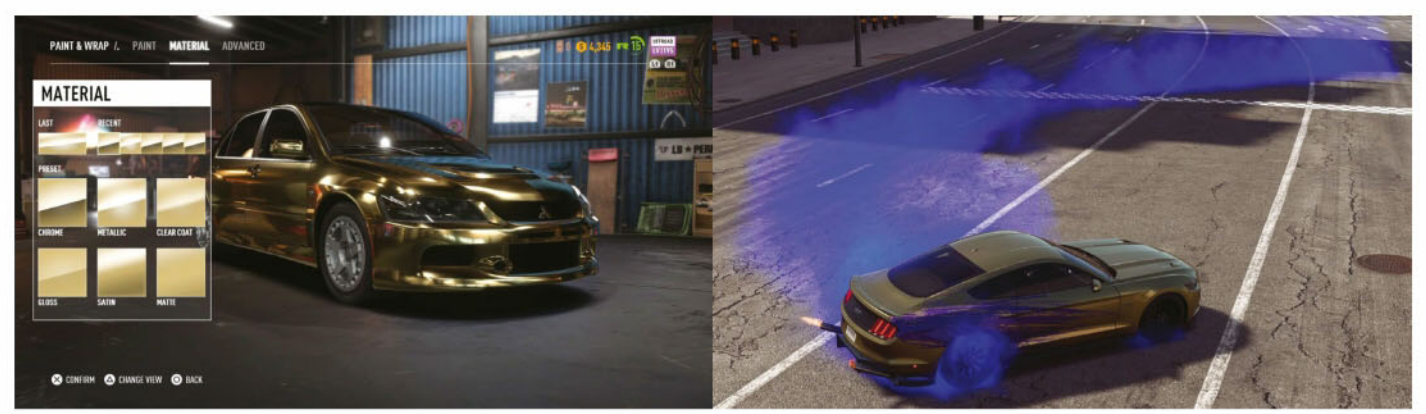
Yes, in the form of Shipments. While not crucial, disappointingly their boost of currency and Part Tokens will alleviate your grind.

Q. CAN YOU UNLOCK CARS WITHOUT BUYING THEM?

There are five Derelicts in the game that you can find. Once you find them, you will have to find extra parts to finish them.

Q. IS THIS CONNECTED TO ANY OTHER NFS GAMES?

Not outwardly. As far as it is presented, this is a new set of characters with no ties to previous games.



Now, that isn't to say it's a complete wash. Variety is *Payback*'s key strength. From downtown to mountain ranges to desserts, there is an appealing quality to the locales of the game. The racetracks built into the fabric of the environments mean that, outside of the confines of a race when all of its structures are stripped away, the moments of driving from one spot to the next at your leisure are when you can see the good in the title.

That's the tragedy of *Need For Speed Payback*. Somewhere in there lies a decent arcade racer but it's buried in barriers that make it unpalatable. The main characters are up there with the most unnatural and irritating in games, and it speaks volumes that that's one of the game's lesser problems. Through the unappetising structure of the campaign, to the defeating loot and progression systems, it all mixes to make an unappealing cocktail. It's a disaster. Coming off a lukewarm reception of the 2015 reboot and taking a year off to get it right, *Payback* is the kind of entry that makes you worry about an entire franchise.





Above: *Need For Speed Payback* is at its best when you are let loose on the world and you use it to your own ends. For all of its foibles, the game really benefits from having racetracks built into its fibre.

CONTAINS SCENES OF MILD ACTION

Super Lucky's Tale

Sometimes you come across a game that's just fine. It's not going to change your life, it's not going to impact you in any great way, it may entertain for a little bit, but it's not really excelling in any way. Enter *Super Lucky's Tale*, a game that's about as bang average as you could hope to find.

And we don't mean for that to sound like we're knocking it as being bad in any way. Average is fine. Average will get you through a weekend. And on the Xbox One right now with so few exclusives to enjoy and with so few family-friendly platformers to pick from, average fills a nice gap for anyone looking for something new. It's just not a game we would be shouting about.

This sequel to the VR debut for *Lucky* brings with it whole new levels and quite a bit of variety in its platforming approach. The game keeps things shifting from 3D platforming to 2.5D levels, to mazes, to marble tilt levels. In this respect, the game does very well. Nothing sticks around long enough to be too samey or repetitive, which is good. That said, it's not over-stocked with new ideas, in the way some more recent 3D platformers on other systems have offered.

Lucky himself is a nice enough character to spend time with, but his general lack of real charm speaks to a personality deficiency across the game. None of the NPCs really feel very fun or engaging, the cat enemies are silly and odd, but still feel rather bland. And the enemy types (bees, killer plants, all rather familiar fare) remain consistently basic and predictable throughout. Fine for helping you know what to do at all times, less good for keeping things interesting or changing up your approach as you play.

Mechanically, *Super Lucky's Tale* isn't the best, but like much of the rest of the game, not the worst either. The jumping and leap control is solid enough; not too floaty and with some reasonable mid-jump control. The double jump is a little weedy, which makes its use unpredictable. Most frustrating though is some inconsistency in the geometry of some levels where objects you need to climb become awkward to stand on or where Lucky won't clamber up to position the way he does on other stages. And the collectibles keep you hunting to unlock stages and the final boss battle, but the slog doesn't feel particularly fun. It all starts to become a bit rote.

Super Lucky's Tale is a pleasant game in many respects, not particularly failing in any area, but not excelling either. It's just not quite imaginative enough, charming enough, funny enough, well-written enough or challenging enough to make much of an impact. But what's there feels like a tidy if ignorable package.

DETAILS

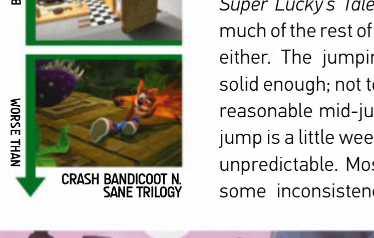
FORMAT: Xbox One
OTHER FORMATS: PC
ORIGIN: USA
PUBLISHER: Microsoft Studios
DEVELOPER: Playful Corp
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

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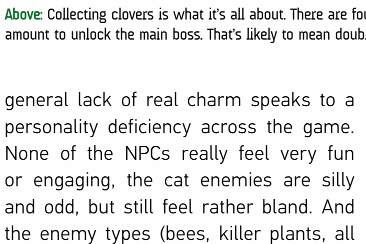
I AM BREAD



WORSE THAN



CRASH BANDICOOT N. SANE TRILOGY



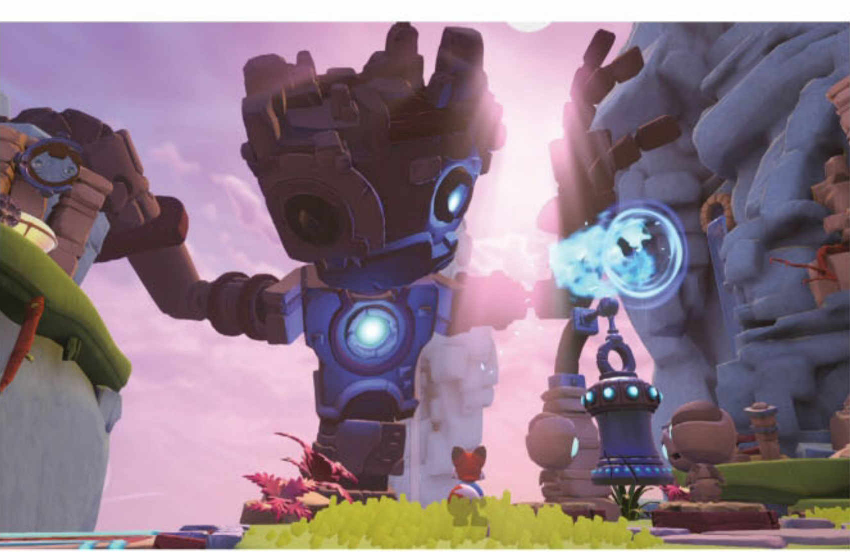
Above: Collecting clovers is what it's all about. There are four available on each level and you need to collect a certain amount to unlock the main boss. That's likely to mean doubling back to some earlier levels before moving forward.

FINGERPRINT

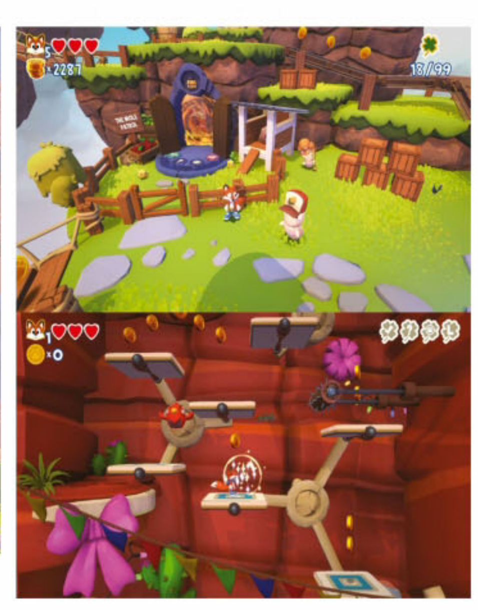
WHAT MAKES THIS GAME UNIQUE

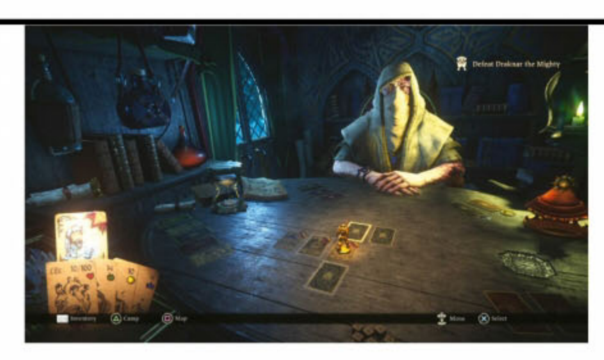
FIXED POSITION: The fixed camera position makes *Super Lucky's Tale* feel like even more of a throwback. It also gives the game a reasonable sense of forward momentum, since not being able to fully turn the camera makes it unlikely there's anything worth turning back for.

VERDICT 5/10
JUST NOT QUITE ENOUGH



Above: Lucky is a nice enough character, but we can't help but feel that his sister Lyra, who introduces the game and writes letters to her brother throughout, is much cooler. She's a fighter pilot too. We kind of wish we were playing her game.







Above: Each of the four companions brings with them abilities and traits that make them suited for certain types of encounters and trials, both in and out of combat. Completing their storylines unlocks upgraded versions, too.

THE GAME HAS CHANGED

Hand Of Fate 2

Genre hybrids have only become more prevalent as games have matured as a medium, but there's always the risk of developers spreading their efforts too thin. While a dash of RPG mechanics here or a branching narrative there may help to freshen up otherwise traditional experiences, there's a delicate balance to strike to avoid ending up with something muddy and/or needlessly convoluted. On paper, then, something like *Hand Of Fate* should be almost doomed to failure – it cherry-picks key elements from not only videogaming but beyond into the tabletop space, blending seemingly disparate ingredients into a unique and exotic dish. With Arkham-style action combat, loot pools based on pre-assembled card decks, visual novel-style exposition and development and more, such a muddled mix of mechanics has no right to work… yet it does, brilliantly.

The Dealer is the glue that holds everything together here, reprising his role as compère and narrator to great effect. He's a fascinating character, and wonderfully performed whether he's mocking your habits and shortcomings or simply fleshing out locations and environments that are told rather than shown. As such, it's a shame that his dialogue tends to repeat so frequently, especially apparent since the structure of the game often makes replaying missions necessary. While the core mechanics operate very similarly to the original game, the new quest-based framework makes it feel instantly fresh and constantly evolving. Every mission is like a self-contained mini RPG campaign, each with its own hazards, hardships and even rule sets. Deck-building plays a much greater role here too, with key complications highlighted before a quest and cards related to those themes conveniently flagged. You could scrape through most missions with a simple deck, but tailoring your encounters and equipment to the task at hand is usually the only way to meet optional objectives and in turn unlock even more powerful cards for future use.

Pretty much every other aspect has evolved similarly, each feeding into a deeper and more varied overall experience. Putting tokens (which unlock new cards when certain criteria are met) on equipment cards further encourages thoughtful customisation and experimentation, while some cards play by their own rules with effects that may escalate or diminish through repeat use. Combat too is refined, still basic yet functional, with greater variety to weapons, enemies and encounters, as well as companion characters each of whom again works well in different circumstances. They also play into the expanded chance mechanics, the shuffled 'success/failure' cards of the original joined by three new minigames (dice, roulette and pendulum) with each of the four possible companions offering an edge in one of these crucial deciding factors.

Well-written, cleverly built and thoroughly enjoyable, *Hand Of Fate 2* is (the odd performance hiccup aside) a masterclass in sequel-making that sees the promise of the ambitious original finally realised – further diversifying content yet delivering a more tightly-woven experience isn't something a lot of studios can pull off, so kudos to the team for doubling down on this superb concept so skilfully.

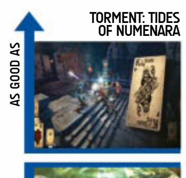
VERDICT 8/10
A HUGELY SUCCESSFUL RESHUFFLE

DETAILS

FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: PC, Xbox One
ORIGIN: Australia
PUBLISHER: Defiant Development
DEVELOPER: In-house
PRICE: £19.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A

AS GOOD AS

TORMENT: TIDES OF NUMENARA



BETTER THAN



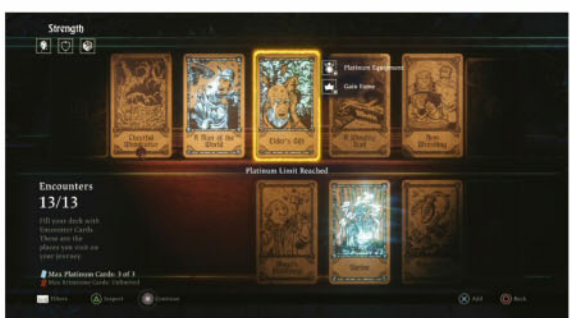
HAND OF FATE

ENHANCED

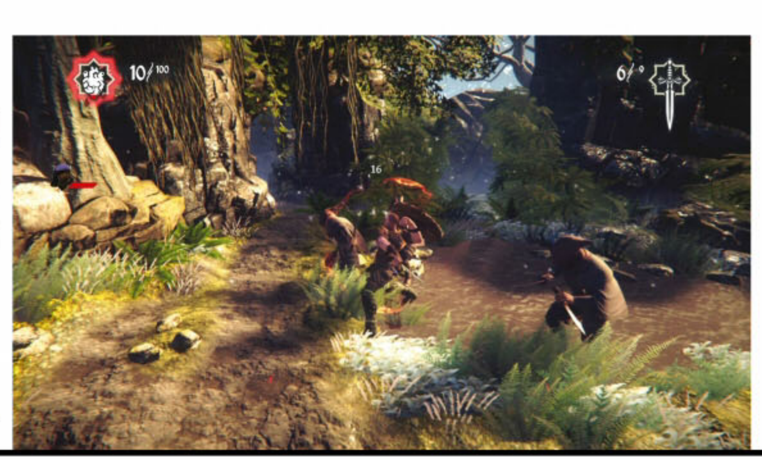
IMPROVING ON THE ORIGINAL

A FIGHTING CHANCE: Combat is greatly improved, with multiple weapon classes, loads of new artifacts and enemy classes, and much larger battles possible.

TRY, TRY AGAIN: The rewards for clearing a chapter with a gold medal are usually worth going for – you may need to return to older challenges with a better deck to get them, though.



Below: The card selection is even more varied than last time, thanks in part to the addition of two new types of card. Platinum cards offer considerable boons, while Brimstone cards bring the game's toughest challenges – both are rightly restricted in their usage.



THE FARCE UNLEASHED

Sonic Forces

***Sonic Forces* is a mess.** Even without the unenviable platforming competition offered by the luscious playgrounds of *Super Mario Odyssey* and the throwback pixels of *Sonic Mania*, the latest adventure for Sega's mascot and his endless array of furry associates would feel like a game torn between identities, at a loss for a reason to exist.

Does *Forces* want to evoke the 2D originals of the 8- and 16-bit era, the 3D mixed bags that followed or serve as a sequel to the one game that combined aesthetics without representing an unmitigated disaster, 2011's *Sonic Generations*? It fails on all three fronts. It's definitely a hand of friendship to the Sonic fan art community, with its inclusion of a custom-created avatar. But *Forces* only casts the player as their unique hero half the time, frequently putting them in the shoes of the can't-stop-talking modern Sonic or his alternate-dimension (and mercifully mute) retro counterpart.

As often as your mutant bird, bear or bunny is grapple-hooking around collapsing bridges and lunar bases, they're left on the sidelines, *Forces*' baffling narrative only initially calls on them when all else fails. Naturally, it makes sense that a Sonic game would have you play as Sonic – but given that this game's unique selling point is its design-your-own-hero feature, it's surprising that they spend so much time off screen.

There are moments when worlds collide – and not just in the sense that select levels shift perspective from the side of your avatar to behind their blurry butt. Your character, 'The Rookie', will sometimes team up with Sonic, a single jump command sending both of them into the air. These stages climax with a Double Boost, where completing one of the game's inconsistent quick-time events sends the two flying forward at near-unstoppable speed. It's cool enough the first time you see it, but like most instances of relative panache in *Sonic Forces*, feels tired by the second.

Neither the 3D nor 2D approach really works. There are times when control via the chase camera feels like it's stuck in the mud. And player avatars are so tiny in the side-on sequences that they easily become lost against a variety of busy backgrounds. Colour can be problematic, too – good luck if you've made yourself a red Rookie during one particular face-off against *Forces*' original antagonist, the Eggman-affiliated Infinite.

As a dress-up experience, *Forces* excels. The completion of every level and mission awards you with a plethora of threads to deck your avatar in. But as a game, it's an unfocused, erratic, undeniably loud but ultimately hollow franchise entry where an excess of energy has been mistaken for excitement. *Mania* illustrated that there's life in the old hog yet – but *Forces* is a red-sneakered spin-dash in the wrong direction.

DETAILS

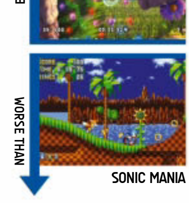
FORMAT: PS4
OTHER FORMATS: Xbox One, Switch, PC
ORIGIN: Japan
PUBLISHER: Sega
DEVELOPER: Sonic Team (In-House)
PRICE: £32.99
RELEASE: Out now
PLAYERS: 1
ONLINE REVIEWED: N/A



BETTER THAN

BUBSY: THE WOOLIES STRIKE BACK





WORSE THAN

SONIC MANIA

CONNECTED

EXPANDING THE GAMEPLAY

AVATAR OVERLOAD: While there's no simultaneous online multiplayer, you can 'rent' avatars from other players, rescue them in single-attempt SOS missions and register stage completion times on global leaderboards.



VERDICT 4/10

LESS CHILI DOG DELIGHT, MORE DOG'S DINNER





Above: *Sonic Forces* is a looker at times, but levels soon become a blur of repetitive actions.
Right: Your Rookie rescues modern Sonic from Eggman's clutches early on… If only they hadn't.



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"Mechanics blend seamlessly into storytelling in a way that is both poetic and utterly harrowing"

ANNA HOLLINRAKE, SENIOR ARTIST, CLIMAX STUDIOS



WHY I ❤...

WHAT REMAINS OF EDITH FINCH

ANNA HOLLINRAKE,
SENIOR ARTIST, CLIMAX STUDIOS

"*What Remains of Edith Finch* is a game of vignettes. Each one tells a tragic tale about the Finch family, and in the factory worker Lewis' story, mechanics blend seamlessly into storytelling in a way that is both poetic and utterly harrowing. Lewis loses himself in his own mind whilst he unendingly chops off fish heads at the plant, and I remember the factory floor melting away, still putting more fish through the guillotine, and forgetting how grim that reality was. I lost myself in the motions of it all, just like Lewis did, and in that moment I was completely in sync with Lewis and his escape from monotony. Empathy in games at its best."

RETRO

NO.195



90 RETRO GUIDE TO... NINTENDO DS

With its double-screen design, the DS wasn't necessarily destined to be a mega-hit, but thanks to games like these it took the world by storm. How many did you play?

BEHIND THE SCENES

96 X-MEN: THE RAVAGES OF APOCALYPSE

How one of Marvel's most popular superhero teams merged with the Quake engine to make a stellar action game experience and a breakthrough mod hit

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From early-Eighties computer game development to head of technology at TT Fusion, we reflect on the wide-ranging career of a gaming great

GAME-CHANGERS

106 ASSASSIN'S CREED

How Creed helped set a new bar for open-world realism, took character animation to a new level and launched one of the biggest IPs in gaming today

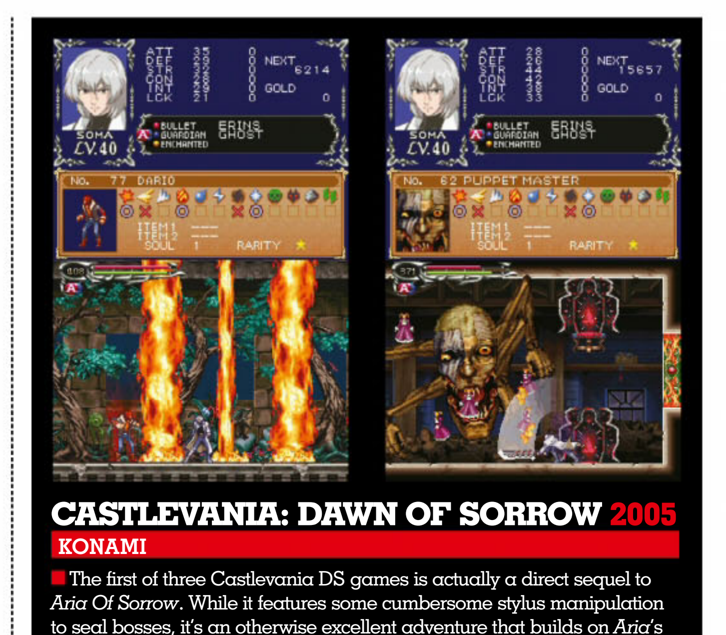
THE RETRO GUIDE TO…
NINTENDO DS

Nintendo's dual-screened handheld defied all expectations to become the company's best-selling console. Here's our pick of some of its finest releases

WHEN NINTENDO FIRST announced its innovative handheld, it was heralded as a "third pillar", a system that would complement both the GameCube and the Game Boy Advance. History had other plans for the handheld, however, and it went on to become Nintendo's most popular console of all time, selling over 154 million units in the process.

The success of Nintendo's machine seems obvious with the help of hindsight, but on release it seemed ludicrous. The machine itself seemed to be on the same power level as the N64 (*Super Mario 64 DS* was actually a launch game), and was facing stiff competition from Sony's incoming PSP, which was (wrongly) seen at the time as being on the same power level as the PS2. Many felt the stylus controls of the DS were nothing more than a gimmick, and a large host of shovelware lent credence to that, but that was only half the story.

A strong advertising campaign with well-known celebrities like Patrick Stewart and Beyonce helped capture the all-important mass market, while a new wave of games like *Brain Training* and *Nintendogs* made us reconsider what games could actually be. It also proved to be a fertile breeding ground for many popular genres, with puzzle games and Japanese RPGs doing particularly well on the system. The DS may not have been cutting edge, but it was fresh and exciting, and also acted as a portent for the later popularity of mobile games. It's an astonishing system that everyone needs to experience.



CASTLEVANIA: DAWN OF SORROW 2005

KONAMI

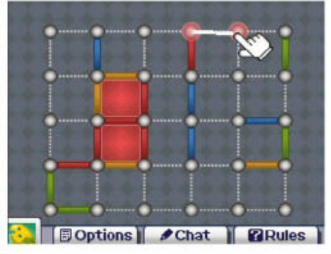
The first of three Castlevania DS games is actually a direct sequel to *Aria Of Sorrow*. While it features some cumbersome stylus manipulation to seal bosses, it's an otherwise excellent adventure that builds on *Aria*'s 'Tactical Soul' to give hero Soma Cruz a staggering array of different weapons. Completing the game unlocks Julius Mode, effectively trebling *Dawn Of Sorrow*'s size.

WARIOWARE: TOUCHED! 2004

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Although this Japanese launch game was beaten to the punch by the similarly themed *Feel The Magic*, it holds up far better today. *Touched!* features a number of zany minigames that range from frantically popping balloons to using your breath to fog up virtual windows. There's only a set amount of time to achieve each task, and the game gets progressively faster, so later stages become incredibly hectic. While many of the games offer exceptional longevity, Intelligent Systems presented additional reasons to return thanks to a selection of fun microgames.







42 ALL-TIME CLASSICS 2005

AGENDA

Known elsewhere as *Clubhouse Games*, this is a surprisingly great multiplayer game featuring a staggering array of different parlour games. Stamp Mode is essentially the campaign mode of the game, and allows you to unlock certain games for Free Play mode, while Mission Mode gives you 30 different tasks to complete.



NINTENDOGS 2005

NINTENDO EAD

Releases like *Nintendogs* and *Brain Age* were not only instrumental in allowing Nintendo to reach a brand new audience, but also helped change people's conceptions of what a videogame could be. *Nintendogs* is essentially an advanced version of a Tamagotchi, allowing you to manipulate the stylus to pet, brush and even walk your dog. There are numerous competitions you can take part in, while the microphone can be used to teach your puppy numerous tricks. Several versions of the game were released, featuring a variety of different dog breeds.



ANIMAL CROSSING: WILD WORLD 2005

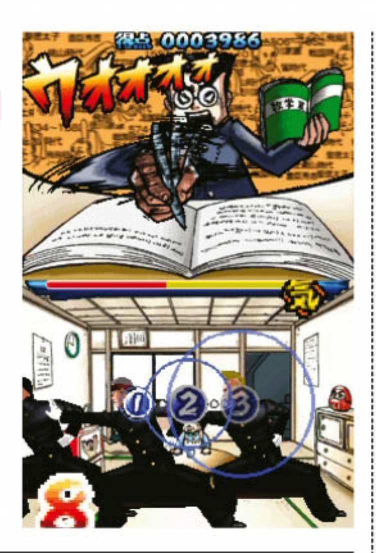
NINTENDO EAD

Wild World was a huge deal on release, as it was the first *Animal Crossing* game to allow you to play online. It essentially builds on the components of previous games in the series, allowing you to expand your home, collect a variety of different fish, insects and fossils for the local museum, and even visit the homes of your friends via its online mode. Sadly, many holiday events like Halloween were removed to help with localisation. Despite the holiday omissions, it remains the best-selling game in the series, having shifted nearly 12 million copies.

OSU! TATAKAE! OUENDAN 2005

INIS

■ So why is *Ouendan* the only Japanese exclusive in our list? Simple: it's arguably the one that kick-started the interest in importing for Nintendo's eclectic handheld. *Ouendan*'s mechanics are superb, requiring you to follow a number of intricate patterns by tracing, tapping or spinning the appropriate markers, and is tied to a life bar that will end the song prematurely if it's allowed to run out. Each song is split into three parts, and tells a story via panelled comic book-styled screens. A westernised version called *Elite Beat Agents* was released in 2006.



MARIO KART DS 2005

NINTENDO EAD

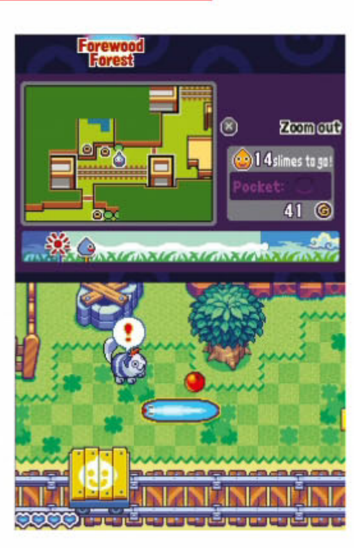
■ The DS is a little short-changed when it comes to truly exceptional racing games, so we're sticking with the only Mario Kart release. *Mario Kart DS* took everything that was great about *Mario Kart: Super Circuit* and amplified it, creating a tremendous portable racer. Shine Runners sees players chasing after Shines, Mission Mode has a number of specific objectives to fulfil, and the popular Battle Mode also adds classic retro courses. While the critically acclaimed online modes are no longer playable, there's more than enough content here to justify a cheeky purchase.

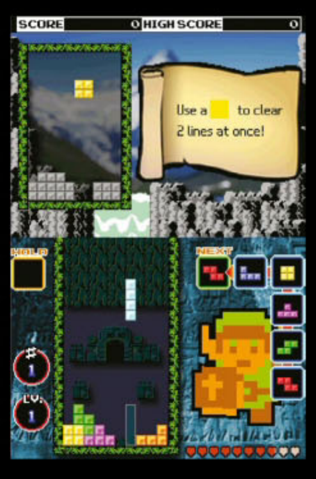
MARIO KART DS TOOK EVERYTHING THAT WAS GREAT ABOUT MARIO KART: SUPER CIRCUIT AND AMPLIFIED IT

DRAGON QUEST HEROES: ROCKET SLIME 2005

TOSE

■ Although a large number of Dragon Quest games are available on the DS, this off-beat offering is easily our favourite. Playing as one of the franchise's eponymous blue slimes, the aim is to traverse the gorgeous-looking overworld in search of your 100 missing friends, who will unlock new areas of your town as they are rescued. That's only half the game, however, as Rocket also gets to man a gigantic tank and take part in battles where he must use items he's collected in the overworld for makeshift ammunition.





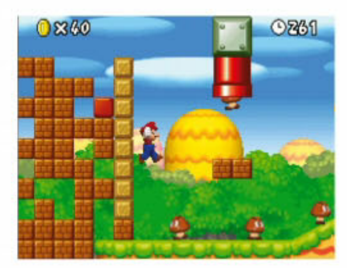


TETRIS DS 2006

NINTENDO SPD

■ We came close to picking *Zookeeper*, *Meteos* and *Planet Puzzle League* as the system's best puzzle game, but none of them can match the sheer variety that *Tetris DS* offers. It boasts a phenomenal number of different gameplay modes, many of which feature popular Nintendo characters, and even the touch-based puzzles work pretty well. An excellent puzzle game that we still revisit.





NEW SUPER MARIO BROS 2006

NINTENDO EAD

■ It took 14 years for a traditional side-on Mario platformer to appear after *Super Mario Land 2*, but it was certainly worth the wait. Many of Mario's 3D moves are incorporated into the gameplay, which greatly opens up how each level can be approached, while the need to seek out three giant coins on each stage ensures plenty of replay value.

PROFESSOR LAYTON AND THE CURIOUS VILLAGE 2007

LEVEL-5

■ Although many prefer *The Unwound Future*, the original *Professor Layton* remains an excellent introduction to the series. Created in collaboration with Chiba University professor Akira Tago, *Curious Village* is heavily based on his popular *Head Gymnastics* series, and features many of the same mind-bending puzzles. It's all married to an entertaining story that sees Professor Layton and his assistant Luke discovering the mystery of St Mystere after receiving a letter from the Lady Dahlia.

CONTRA 4 2007

WAYFORWARD TECHNOLOGIES

Created to celebrate the original game's 20th anniversary, *Contra 4* is another slick offering from WayForward Technologies. A new grappling hook is introduced that effectively allows your hero to better traverse the two screens, but it's otherwise business as usual, with your soldier unleashing an insane amount of firepower on anything that gets in his way. While playing over two screens makes it a little more difficult, it does open up the game considerably, allowing for some truly ridiculous boss encounters. Sadly, it was never released in the UK.



THE WORLD ENDS WITH YOU 2007

JUPITER, SQUARE ENIX

This RPG is heavily inspired by the youth culture of modern-day Shibuya, and is notable for its dark storyline and strong characterisation. It also features an interesting combat system that sees battles taking part across both screens simultaneously.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: PHANTOM HOURGLASS 2007

NINTENDO EAD

Unusually for a Zelda title, it features one core dungeon that Link continually returns to. It's also stylus-based, and has the same aesthetic style as *The Wind Waker*.



IT'S ONE OF SEVERAL DS GAMES PLAYED VERTICALLY, WHICH MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE YOU'RE PLAYING AN INTERACTIVE NOVEL

HOTEL DUSK: ROOM 215 2007

CING

This charming point-and-click adventure has ex-detective Kyle Hyde searching for his former partner. It's an entertaining yarn bolstered by strong narration and gorgeous art style, and features a number of interesting characters. Some of the puzzles are a little obtuse, but the weaving storyline keeps pulling you in. Interestingly, it's one of several DS games that are played vertically, which makes you feel like you're playing an interactive novel. An equally enjoyable sequel, *Last Window: The Secret Of Cape West*, was released in 2010.





THE COLLECTOR

We chat to Graham Dawes about collecting for the DS

What were your thoughts when Nintendo unveiled the DS?

I'd been a fan of Nintendo handhelds since I got a Game Boy in the mid Nineties, so I was really looking forward to the DS. It sounds silly now, but for me, being able to play *Mario 64* on the go was mind-blowing. I ended up getting the original DS on launch, I enjoyed *Mario 64*, but it was playing *WarioWare Touched!* that made me realise the system was something special. I ended up getting each of hardware models on launch (DS lite, DSi, DSi XL), and this continued through to the 3DS (I only stopped with the 2DS).

What do you think the strengths of the DS are?

For me, the DS is such a great system due to the sheer quality and variety of its games. Everything from amazing JRPGs to point-and-click adventures, platformers and the only sequel to *Okami*.

How long have you been collecting for the system?

I've been collecting since launch, so I got the majority of games when they were relatively cheap. More recently I've been trying to pick of any interesting games I see at a reasonable price.

What's your favourite game on the DS and why?

My favourite DS game is *Radiant Historia*. It's one of my favourite RPGs, it's got a great story, unique combat system and one of the best soundtracks on the system.

What's been the hardest game for you to source?

Getting the Game and Watch Collection from the Nintendo Starts Catalogue was probably the hardest, and I'd heard it was available in the US and Japan, but had to wait ages for it to be available in UK (luckily I have enough Star Points saved up!)

Why do you think the DS is now becoming so popular with collectors?

I think it's the quality of the games that make the system so popular with collectors. The best games for the system are just as playable now as they were in the ten or so years since they were first launched. I also think the fact that there are so many good games that are reasonably priced.

What advice would you give to anyone starting their own DS collection?

In terms of hardware, I would go with the DS Lite, as this model still has GBA compatibility while having a much better screen than the original. As for games, I'd avoid the licensed tat and go for games you want to play. The DS is definitely a system that deserves to be played!

KNOW YOUR DS

NINTENDO DS 2004

The original DS is rather ugly in its design, and has a weak display screen, but it's relatively comfortable to hold, and has Game Boy Advance compatibility.

NINTENDO DS LITE 2006

Nintendo's redesign was slimmer and more lightweight, with a better quality screen that offered four levels of brightness. It retains the ability to play Game Boy Advance games.

NINTENDO DSI 2008

This was a significant upgrade, adding two cameras, an SD card and the ability to access a digital eShop. It lacks a GBA slot, and all DSi specific software is region-locked.

NINTENDO DSI XL 2009

While it retains the annoying region locking of its predecessor, the DSi XL is generally considered the best DS system to use due to its fantastic screen size and display.

ADVANCE WARS: DARK CONFLICT 2008

INTELLIGENT SYSTEMS

Credit must be given to Intelligent Systems for taking its DS follow-up in a more interesting direction. The tone of the game is far darker than previous instalments, while CO Powers have been greatly toned down, no longer affecting every unit. Individual units can level up in battle, while new units like bikes, gunboats and the Anti-Tank have been introduced. *Dark Conflict* was also the first in the series to include online multiplayer, but like many DS games, the service has long since shut down.





VIVA PIÑATA: POCKET PARADISE 2008

RARE

There are obviously compromises, but it still astonishes us how Rare was able to cram its popular Xbox 360 life simulator into the DS. It even adds a brand new Playground designed for younger gamers.

TRAUMA CENTRE: UNDER THE KNIFE 2 2008

ATLUS, VANGUARD

This superior sequel continues the adventures of Dr Derek Stiles. You're still performing surgery on a variety of patients, but the controls are far more responsive, and it lacks the difficulty spikes of the 2005 original.



CAPYBARA HAS PUT A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF THOUGHT INTO THEMING THE GAMEPLAY

MIGHT & MAGIC: CLASH OF HEROES 2009

CAPYBARA GAMES

While there are a huge number of engaging RPGs and puzzle games on the DS, there are far fewer titles that combine both genres so successfully. The turned-based battles are a variant on the match 3 games, but Capybara has put a tremendous amount of thought into theming the gameplay to represent the different races and animals you encounter. There's a huge overworld map, numerous side quests and a surprisingly enjoyable story that involves demons, elves and a powerful artifact.







GRAND THEFT AUTO: CHINATOWN WARS 2009

ROCKSTAR LEEDS

There's a lot to like about *Chinatown Wars*. It makes fantastic use of the touchscreen, has great cel-shaded visuals, and lots of new mechanics, including being able to lower your wanted level by destroying police cars. Its best addition, though, is a brilliant new drugs-running sub-game.



ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS: MILES EDGEWORTH 2009

CAPCOM

All the Phoenix Wright DS games should be in your collection, but this offering is easily our favourite. As its name suggests, Capcom's sequel focuses on Miles Edgeworth, who starts off as the antagonist of Phoenix in the first game. It's structurally a lot different to earlier games, too, featuring more focus on the point-and-click elements. There's a great logic system at work that allows the player to combine items to create new solutions, while the Rebuttal sections remain just as nail-biting as earlier instalments.





MARIO & LUIGI: BOWSER'S INSIDE STORY 2010

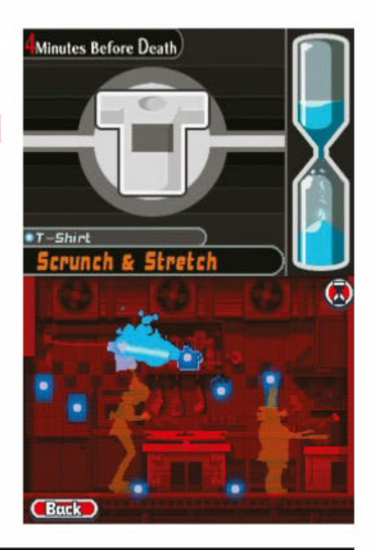
ALPHADREAM

The Mario & Luigi games are always good value, but this one ramps things up by introducing Bowser as a playable character. While he's trying to defeat series nemesis Fawful, the brothers have their own adventure in the Koopa King's innards. It works brilliantly, while Bowser adds fresh combat mechanics and some entertaining minigames.

GHOST TRICK: PHANTOM DETECTIVE 2010

CAPCOM

This entertaining adventure game was overseen by Shu Takami, the creator of the Phoenix Wright series. Taking on the role of the recently deceased Sissel, the aim is to work out your identity and discover how you died. As Sissel regains his memories, he helps numerous people by performing ghost tricks that range from inhabiting items to possessing corpses. It's a neat concept, and allows Takumi and his team to create some very inventive puzzles. It was also released quite successfully on iOS.



POKÉMON BLACK AND WHITE 2010

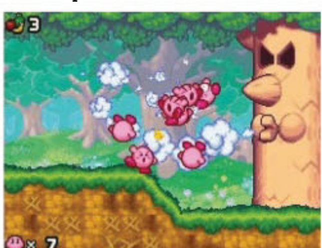
GAME FREAK

Game Freak added numerous improvements to its popular series, including enhanced visuals, Rotation and Triple battles, and Combination moves. It also makes it more obvious when rare Pokémon are nearby, and features changing seasons.

KIRBY: MASS ATTACK 2011

HAL LABORATORY

Every DS Kirby game is worth owning, but this last title is perhaps the most inventive. It's entirely stylus-based, and revolves around you manipulating a group of cute Kirbies to solve puzzles or attack enemies.



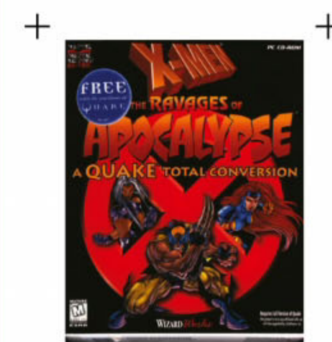
MORE DS GAMES TO TRY

- SUPER MARIO 64 DS, 2004
- ANOTHER CODE: TWO MEMORIES, 2005
- KIRBY: POWER PAINTBRUSH, 2005
- METEOS, 2005
- SONIC RUSH, 2005
- METROID PRIME: HUNTERS, 2006
- PUZZLE LEAGUE DS, 2007
- PICROSS DS, 2007
- RETRO GAME CHALLENGE, 2007
- FIRE EMBLEM: SHADOW DRAGON, 2008
- RHYTHM HEAVEN, 2008
- CHRONO TRIGGER, 2008
- SPACE INVADERS EXTREME, 2008
- 9 HOURS, 9 PERSONS, 9 DOORS, 2009
- POKÉMON HEARTGOLD/SOULSILVER 2009
- SUPER SCRIBBLENAUTS, 2010
- RADIANT HISTORIA, 2010
- POKEMON CONQUEST, 2012

BEHIND THE SCENES

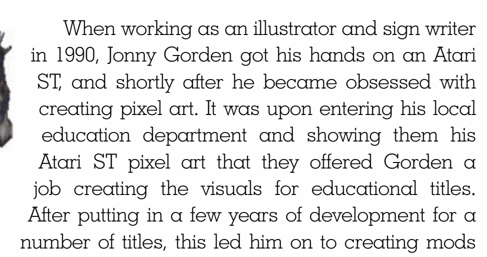
X-MEN: THE RAVAGES OF APOCALYPSE

We go behind the scenes of the influential Quake total conversion that helped light the way for mods becoming fully-fledged releases



Released: 1997
Format: Windows, DOS, Mac, Linux
Publisher: WizardWorks
Key Staff: Jonny Gorden (project director, game design, graphics), Ryan Feltrin (lead programmer), James Elson (level design, producer, textures).

LONG BEFORE MODS LIKE *KILLING FLOOR*, *BLACK MESA* AND *THE STANLEY PARABLE* GAINED ENOUGH TRACTION TO BECOME FULL RETAIL TITLES, THERE WAS *X-MEN: THE RAVAGES OF APOCALYPSE*, A LARGELY FORGOTTEN GAMING GEM THAT TURNS THE *X-MEN* FRANCHISE ON ITS HEAD. However, while recent examples of mods that became fully fledged retail games were generally given a decent amount of time to polish and fine-tune the title, *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* was given just over three months of development time. With an initially planned new level, and *X-Men* characters on top of the base *Quake* game, that expanded to include an entire single-player campaign. The pressure was certainly on for Zero Gravity Entertainment.

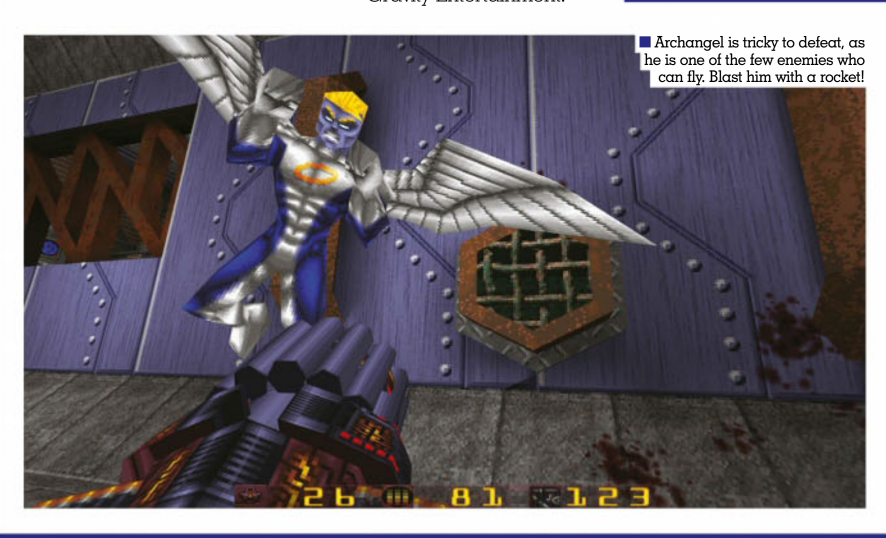




AS MARVEL WAS KEEN TO CAPITALISE ON THE CHRISTMAS MARKET, IT GAVE GORDEN AND HIS TEAM ONLY THREE AND A HALF MONTHS OF DEVELOPMENT TIME

When working as an illustrator and sign writer in 1990, Jonny Gorden got his hands on an Atari ST, and shortly after he became obsessed with creating pixel art. It was upon entering his local education department and showing them his Atari ST pixel art that they offered Gorden a job creating the visuals for educational titles. After putting in a few years of development for a number of titles, this led him on to creating mods within free-to-use engines. In fact, in 1996 Gorden created Bugs Doom using the *Doom II* engine. *Bugs Doom* essentially replaced various enemy sprites throughout the original *Doom II* game with *Looney Tunes* characters. For instance, the mod replaced the classic Demon with Taz, the Heavy Weapon Dude with Yosemite Sam, and Zombie Man with Daffy Duck, all topped off by having the player take the role of a leather-jacket-clad Bugs Bunny. Soon after that, *Quake* was released upon the world, fundamentally changing how modders created their own levels in ways like never before.

This is when Gorden discovered that, unlike with the *Doom II* engine, with *Quake* he wasn't merely bound to replacing pre-existing characters. Instead, the *Quake* engine's new code could be added to the game, which – merged alongside new character models and levels – could turn *Quake* into an entirely new game, opening endless possibilities for new experiences. Personally for Gorden, *Quake*'s 3D capabilities initially meant the most when it came down to what advantages the engine had over the *Doom II* engine. No longer did he need to painstakingly draw and shade in every single frame of animation for a character. With 3D modelling now in his arsenal, as Gorden puts it, the *Quake* engine made a "better balance between character creation and animation."



Archangel is tricky to defeat, as he is one of the few enemies who can fly. Blast him with a rocket!



Thanks to his regenerative powers, Wolverine will keep coming back to life after he is killed. Kill him and run!



The Flamethrower's groovy. Once you've roasted your victim, they just stand there, charred and skeletal, and then you can shoot them and they'll explode, or you can punch them to bits

Amiga Format, 1998



Since the release of *The Uncanny X-Men* for the NES in 1989, there has been an incredibly long list of *X-Men* titles for every platform available. Though many seem to have missed the mark in terms of quality, with the long history of characters, alliances and eras to choose from, the *X-Men* franchise (and that of the general Marvel universe) is one that sometimes strikes gold in gaming. However, Gorden wasn't necessarily interested in creating an *X-Men* title when he started creating what was originally called *X-Men Quake*. Initially kicking around the idea for Judge Dredd mod, in speaking about the birth of *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* he explains to us that: "After playing *Tomb Raider* one day, I wanted to see if I could make a low-polygon female game model as good as (or better than) the very first Lara Croft. I was familiar with the *Quake* modding scene, and I was also a fan of the *X-Men*, so I chose to make *Storm*. I learned two things. One: it wasn't easy to make a character look good with such a limited polygon budget (under 500 polygons). And two: I loved the challenge! After making *Storm* I was eager to make my favourite *X-Men* character: Wolverine. I thought the Fiend's behaviour in *Quake* would work really well for him without having to change any QuakeC files, so he ended up being the first playable character." However, while the game eventually contained a pretty meaty single-player campaign on top of its robust multi-player mode, that wasn't always the case. In fact, the original pitch for *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* offered something a little more simplistic. As Gorden explains: "My original plan was to build the X-Mansion to replace the first level of *Quake*, but otherwise use the existing *Quake* levels, just replacing the characters and weapons. I knew from the beginning that multi-player was where this would really stand out, with players being able to play as their favourite *X-Men* character, so a single-player campaign wasn't really my focus."

Early in the stages of development, Gorden began to promote *The Ravages Of Apocalypse*, which led to countless publications and websites emailing and calling him for more information. The attention could have either made or killed the project. As he recalls: "Many people questioned the legality of what I was doing, but it hadn't really occurred to me at the time. After all, it was a fan project, and there were mods for *The Simpsons* and *Aliens*. But within a couple of weeks, the *Aliens Total Conversion* was taken down by Fox, so it became the number-one question everyone was asking. It really wasn't a problem until I was ready to release something, and I thought if the project got to that point, I could contact Marvel with something substantial

FEATURED IN THE GAME ARE WOLVERINE, ARCHANGEL, JEAN GREY, STORM, CYCLOPS, ROGUE, GAMBIT, BEAST, BISHOP, CANNONBALL, ICEMAN AND PSYLOCKE

to show." Soon after that, Gorden received an email from Kyle Bousquet, who previously had experience in licensing *Quake* total conversions, while also having some contacts in Marvel itself. A week after Gorden and Bousquet kicked off the discussion about possibly partnering with Marvel, he passed on the details of *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* to Marvel. In response, Gorden got an email from the senior vice president of Marvel at the time. They were incredibly impressed by the project, and this not only cemented the survival of *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* as a project, but also meant that the game was now destined to be a retail title, officially branded with the Marvel seal of approval.

In speaking about the details of the deal Gorden did with Marvel, he says: "The main elements of the deal concerned the budget and time frame, neither of which ended up being close to what we really needed, but that was largely due to my naivety. At the time, Marvel was going through bankruptcy, so that loomed behind everything, but the budget ended up being slightly less than the absolute bare minimum that we needed to survive. We just hoped we'd get some royalties to make up for it! Once the deal was done, we worked closely with Dave McElhatten who was assigned as executive producer for Marvel. We needed their approval for every aspect of the game. For example, the first Wolverine model I made was based on his appearance in the comics at the time, but Marvel wanted a more traditional look for him in the game. They were pretty flexible though, enough to approve the idea of clones and all the blood, which was a bit surprising even then."

As Marvel was keen to capitalise on the Christmas market, it gave Gorden and his team only three and a half months of development time, with the finished game expected to be in its hands by the November of 1997. This seemed doable to Gorden when the game only contained one new level, new weapons and a number of *X-Men* characters for multi-player mode, but a conversation with id Software changed that positive outlook rather quickly. With the contract set in stone and time already ticking away, as Gorden explains: "id Software were getting so many requests for commercial



Using the Flamethrower on enemies burns them to a fragile – and breakable – collection of charred bones.



Various items and power-ups can be collected in *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* to aid you on your mission, including protective armour.



THE REBIRTH OF MARVEL

IN 1996 MARVEL WAS NOT THE BEHEMOTH IT IS NOW, AND ALMOST WENT BANKRUPT

AT THIS VERY moment, Marvel as a company is at the height of its powers. Though it's always been a force to be reckoned with since it first began in 1939, the company has gone through countless successes, troubles and money issues, but always remained successful throughout. However, in 1996 that was an entirely different story. Though the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties were deemed the golden years of the comic-book giant, the Nineties fared worse. Regardless of the reason as to why this was, its success bubble had seemingly burst, and over a mere three years, Marvel's stock value had been decimated. For instance, shares that were once worth $35.75 each in 1993 had dropped to $2.375 by 1996. This didn't stop Marvel from working with Gorden to bring *X-Men: The Ravages Of Apocalypse* to the masses, however, though it did prevent it from giving Zero Gravity Entertainment an ideal budget.

Bleeding money and seemingly close to shutting its doors, Marvel Entertainment was created in hopes of expanding the company into different areas of media. At the heart of Marvel Entertainment were the company's movie franchises, and though these started off as separate series such as the *Blade Trilogy*, Ang Lee's *Hulk* and the original *Spider-Man Trilogy* by Sam Raimi, starting with 2008's *Iron Man* film and the subsequent $4 billion buy out by Disney, it kicked off the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At the point of the release of *Thor: Ragnarok* there have been 17 films in the Cinematic Universe so far. The massive yearly success of the Marvel films, alongside TV shows like *Daredevil*, *The Punisher* and *The Defenders*, and also various videogames, led to Marvel being worth more than it has ever been before.



releases of mods, they were just saying no to everyone. But they were so impressed with *X-Men* (they'd been following its progress) that they would approve so long as it had all new levels. So I quickly made a plan to include two new episodes, each ending up with five levels."

In speaking about the extremely short development time that was set before them, in hindsight he says: "Something we didn't fully appreciate in the beginning was that making a game under that sort of time pressure is so much more difficult than making a game with a more realistic schedule, or making content for a game that already exists, where everything is a known quantity. And we were doing some crazy stuff with the *Quake* engine that it was never built for. So everything was more difficult and took way longer than we expected."

With Gorden at the helm, Ryan Feltrin leading production, and Jim Elson managing the 15 developers who were solely focused on level creation, development for *Ravages Of Apocalypse* was in full swing. The *Ravages Of Apocalypse*'s plot focuses on the super villain Apocalypse capturing the X-Men, and creating an evil clone army from their DNA. With no one left to stop Apocalypse's reign, the job falls to Magneto, the classic super villain/occasional anti-hero of the Marvel franchise. The player takes the role of a nameless cyborg who has been created by Magneto to do his bidding. After the defeat of Apocalypse at the end of Episode 1, it is revealed that Mister Sinister was behind the nefarious plot all along, leading Episode 2 to focus on hunting him down and ultimately stopping the clone army. Though the basic plot remained the same throughout development, when Gorden first pitched it there were some differences. Most notably, Magneto's role was originally that of Dr. Doom, while the reveal that Mister Sinister was behind the evil plot was originally the work of Terminus. Strangely though, Marvel requested the latter change, as no one on the Marvel editorial team even knew who Terminus was, a character who appeared 12 years previously in the Fantastic Four comic-book entitled *Skyfall*.

As Magneto's personally created cyborg, your weapon of choice in *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* comes in the form of a morphing forearm that changes into an array of weapons, including futuristic versions of what are essentially a shotgun, rocket launcher, machine gun and flame thrower, to name a few. However, despite the bombastic choice of weapons at hand, the game isn't exactly a mindless shooter. In fact, not every weapon will work the same against each X-Men clone you come up against. In talking about this Gorden says: "It was really important to me for the X-Men characters to be as authentic as possible, which did make balancing them tricky. My main idea was to offset the characters' abilities with different weapons, so you need to choose the best weapon for each character, with some weapons ineffective against certain characters. This was possible because the weapons are part of the player character, so they're all available from the beginning of the game." This leads the player to be forced to constantly change up their strategy as they play, frequently cycling through their weapons and adapting to a whole manner of play-styles.

The cast of X-Men characters present in the game is definitely the strongest element of *The Ravages Of Apocalypse*. Featured in the game are Wolverine, Archangel, Jean Grey, Storm, Cyclops, Rogue, Gambit, Beast, Bishop, Cannonball, Iceman and Psylocke. They move, act and attack like their comic-book counterparts, and while some are more memorable than others, they very nicely not only make the game feel like part of the Marvel universe, but also one that is played from an entirely new perspective. This, topped off by the fact that the game features a good lashing of blood and gore when killing X-Men clones, makes for a bizarre and twisted *X-Men* adventure, the likes of which hasn't been seen since. However, perhaps due to every enemy in the game being an X-Men clone, some gamers and reviewers found *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* absolutely punishing, even on Normal difficulty. In response to this, Gorden says: "I think the game did end up too


Apocalypse is massive in the game, and you will need to construct a special weapon to take him out.




The closer the player gets to facing off against Apocalypse, levels begin to use various Egyptian iconography and architecture.

> A GAMING EVOLUTION

Team Fortress > X-Men: Ravages Of Apocalypse > Black Mesa

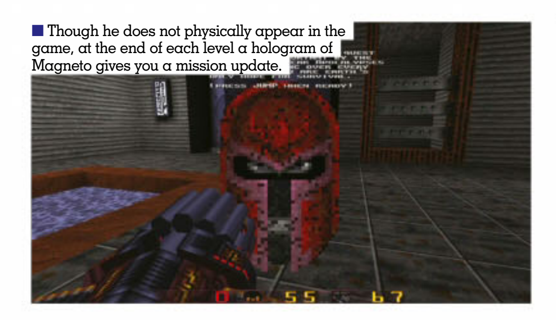


Team Fortress, originally a *Quake* total conversion before it was a standalone title, is the genesis of the now-familiar mod to retail story.





A remake of the original *Half-Life*, *Black Mesa* is a modern day mod that was snapped up by Valve for a full retail release.



■ Though he does not physically appear in the game, at the end of each level a hologram of Magneto gives you a mission update.



difficult. That was partially due to limited testing time, but mainly because we were all experienced *Quake* players, and we wanted it to be challenging, so we made it challenging for us, which ended up too difficult for many users. There's always the Easy setting, but of course no one wants to use that (especially when the manual mocks you for choosing it). We did have an external testing team for the final month, but they were more testing for bugs than gameplay."

Though the game came together in the end, he is still mystified as to how he and his team managed to finish the game with the short development time that Marvel had given them. In speaking about this he says: "It was ridiculous. Everyone was working really hard and practically living on Jolt. For the final two months, I was working at least 20 hours a day, seven days a week. It was a massive struggle to get it all done in the time we had, and we were going right up to the final hours. But the team was amazing, and we all helped each other get through it. The overall production did take longer than three months. I don't remember exactly when I started working on the project full-time, but Ryan came on board in mid-May, and we did get some work done during negotiations. We ramped up production throughout June, and were pretty much full steam by early July. We hit the 15 September beta deadline, but there was still lots to do before the final gold master was delivered on 15 October. But we couldn't stop there, because then we had to get the demo released. After that, we kept working towards a patch to add a bunch of features to multi-play as well as the ability to play the single-player game as an *X-Men* character and, thanks to Ryan's brilliance, a third-person mode." The finished product was overall well received, with many gamers considering it one of, if not the best, *Quake* total conversion in history.

Despite the limited development time, Gorden is pleased that everything he wanted in *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* made it into the final product, even if he would have liked it to have been a bit more balanced and polished. If time and money had not been an issue, though, and he had a more established team at his disposal, he says: "I really wanted to make a proper team-based *X-Men* game. It was something I started to follow up on, but then EA bought an exclusive license for Marvel games, so we lost that opportunity." Looking back at what he and his fellow team at Zero Gravity Entertainment achieved back in 1997 Gorden says: "I'm so proud of what we were all able to accomplish. It's easy to play it now and criticise, and while many of the criticisms are justified, it was a fun game and well received when it was released. It was super fun to play as the X-Men in multi-play, and the single-player game hung together remarkably well, especially considering the time we had with everyone working remotely. More than anything, I'm grateful to everyone on the team who worked so hard to make it happen. We made the best game we possibly could under difficult circumstances, and that's all I could have hoped for."

Nowadays it's quite commonplace for a well-timed or nicely developed mod to find its way onto the market on sale next to its original source title, but *X:Men: The Ravages Of Apocalypse* was a trail blazer, a beacon of what a gamer with a passion for games and an interest in creating could achieve if they put their mind to it. Criminally overlooked in the annals of gaming history, Jonny Gorden's stamp on the industry is still present even today, as modders continue to innovate and expand on their favourite titles, coming up with new concepts and designs in the process.

FOR THE FINAL TWO MONTHS I WAS WORKING AT LEAST 20 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. IT WAS A STRUGGLE



Each X-clone is easily recognisable even from a distance, complete with unique movements, weaponry and tactics

Australian Macworld, 1998



THE SOUND OF THE APOCALYPSE

X-Men: The Ravages Of Apocalypse had a soundtrack to back up its frantic gameplay

FOR A GAME THAT'S so fast paced and high tempo, the soundtrack for *The Ravages Of Apocalypse* needed to match the gameplay. That job ultimately came down to Method Of The W.O.R.M, an industrial band headlined by an artist known as Grimm. Inspired by bands such as Nine Inch Nails, Portishead, Skinny Puppy, Massive Attack and Tom Waits, the sound Method Of The W.O.R.M brings to the game alternates between being tense and subdued to heavy, relentless and loud. Additionally, various samples are used throughout the soundtrack, most notably a quote from the *Twilight Zone* episode 'The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street'. It all comes together to make a soundtrack that is as daring as the game it is accompanied by.



INTERVIEW

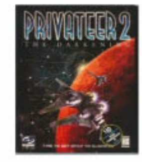
PAUL HUGHES

Though he spent the past decade working on LEGO games as head of technology at TT Fusion, Paul Hughes actually built his career in the early Eighties

SELECT GAMEOGRAPHY



Operation Thunderbolt [1989]
Programmer, Ocean Software



Privateer 2: The Darkening [1996]
Programmer, EA Manchester



LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga [2007]
Lead programmer, TT Fusion



CAN YOU TELL us when you first become interested in computing and gaming?
I'd always been interested in computers from a very early age. My dad used to buy lots of electronics magazines in the late Seventies which described some of the first 'do it yourself' computers. I used to love reading about how they worked at a hardware level but the first computer I used was the Commodore PET. Whilst at middle school, my friend's dad ran a finance business and did all his accounts on a PET 4016, so at weekends we got to go to his office and play *Nightmare Park*. I taught myself BASIC by reading the listings of the few games that he had and the first computer I owned was a ZX81 that was lovingly built for me by my dad (it was actually £20 cheaper if you built it yourself!).

What was the first commercial game that you wrote for?
It was a Pac-Man clone for the Commodore VIC-20 using 3K of machine code. In hindsight it was pretty terrible, despite reviewing very, very well (I did my own graphics and sound). Namco also issued a cease and desist to the publisher after the first couple of months of sale. I'm still on the lookout for an original copy, though.

You ended up working for Ocean. How did that come about?
I started freelancing once I left school, creating music and sound effects for Commodore 64 games with Pete Clarke from my local computer shop. He composed the music and I programmed and entered the data in the music drivers, and we did the soundtracks for *Scooby Doo* by Elite and *Repton 3* by Superior Software. One day I was showing my aunt some of the stuff I was doing and she casually mentioned she knew someone who worked at Ocean in Manchester. That someone was Dave Collier and he invited me in for a visit to the dungeons [the nickname for the Ocean offices] and we talked about tape protection, multiplexing, the whole nine yards for several hours. By the end of the day Gary Bracey had offered me a job, and I started the following Monday. Pete also went on to work with me at Ocean, composing one of the Ocean Loader tracks.

> **BIG BOYS LIKE EA WERE TREATING THEIR DEVELOPERS LIKE ROCK STARS**

How did Ocean approach the making of its games catalogue?
In the early days, we were very much left to our own devices and there wasn't much code sharing between us. You just got assigned a title and an artist and then off you went with a rough idea of what the deadline was. There was nothing formal, nothing written down, just 'here you go'. But the in-house team was amazing, and a lot of the magic of the games in the late Eighties came from the friendly one-upmanship that existed between everybody. Initially, I worked on *Mag Max*, *Operation Thunderbolt* and *Combat School*. I then got into the new



MUSIC TO HIS EARS

"While at Ocean, Paul also wrote all of the game loading music. "It started when Martin Galway left Ocean," he says. "No-one really understood his SID driver so I figured why not write a new one." Musicians Jon Dunn, Matt Cannon and Gari Biasillo specified what they needed and it was first used by *Basket Master* and *Target: Renegade*. "It then went on to be used on all Ocean/Imagine/Special FX titles – most famously used for the Ocean Loader music."





■ As vice president of technology at Warthog, Paul worked on the first-person sci-fi sim *Starlancer* for Microsoft.



STARS IN HIS EYES

"■■■ When Paul Hughes worked on *LEGO Star Wars: The Complete Saga* ("the game I'm most proud of programming," he says), he was determined to include the iconic theme tune. "We had the chance to use John Williams' iconic soundtrack in the game. John, bloomin' Williams," he explains. "So I moved mountains to get compressed digital audio streaming working on the Nintendo DS just so we could have the real thing by the London Philharmonic playing during the game. It was a nightmare getting it all to fit on the cartridge, but it had to be done.""

console team that worked on NES, SNES and Game Boy technologies.

Can you tell us which game you enjoyed working on the most?
Combat School, because working with the late Allan Shortt was an absolute blast. We worked crazy hours but we loved the arcade machine and were always trying to outdo each other.

Did you work on any games you felt were doomed from the start?
Yes, *Mag Max* – without a shadow of a doubt the worst game I've ever programmed. It was a rush job based on a pretty dreadful Nichibutsu arcade machine and its only redeeming feature was a 200-line parallax scroll (every scan line scrolled at a slightly different speed) that gave a nice forced perspective. That was never going to happen on the C64, and when you stripped that away, you were left with a mediocre horizontal scrolling shoot-'em-up.

You mentioned the Ocean Loader, a program called Freeload that displayed a picture and played music while the game was loading. How did it come about?
I'd been working on tape protection for several years and through this got to know Andy Braybrook. Together we came up with all kinds of ruses to stop 'back-up' cartridges like Freeze Frame from working. The results of these conversations were used on Andrew's titles such as *Paradroid* and *Alleykat*. When I joined Ocean there was a lovely chap called Bill Barna who used to do all the disk and tape protection, but about a month after I started he left and no one really had a clue how his stuff worked. Martin Galway mentioned, in passing, that I used to do tape protection for companies like Hewson and, well, the rest is history.

Why do you think it was special?
Well, it came about from wanting to be able to do things whilst the loading happened. It started with keeping the screen on and displaying a loading screen like the Spectrum did, then playing music. Eventually I got it to the point where all the turbo loading was done in the background, so you could even play simple games during the load. I guess it became important because people loved the loading music which removed the tedium of the loading times – they were ten times faster than the standard loader but still a few minutes long. It also managed to stem casual piracy for the all-important initial couple of weeks of sales. It even had mechanisms to partially thwart tape-to-tape copying and all sorts of tricks to confuse freeze cartridges.

What were the reasons behind you leaving Ocean to join EA in Manchester?
In all honesty, money. It was 1992/93 and the industry had started to grow up. Big boys like EA were treating their developers like rock stars with big salaries, bonuses and stock incentives, and they were offering a lead role on a multi-million dollar 'interactive movie' along the lines of *Wing Commander III* requiring some cutting-edge technology. They effectively tripled my earnings overnight.

What was EA like to work for and was there a sense that there was another exciting era on its way?
EA was very production focussed with lots of cross-site groups all over the world to brainstorm with. It was like nothing I'd experienced before – like being part of a giant 10,000-member family of like-minded developers with no-one off limits and everyone being treated as 'the talent'. We were also privy to a lot of early console hardware. When I joined, the teams were getting to grips with the Saturn, the 3DO and, of course, the PlayStation. It was clear 3D was the way the industry was headed, which was fortuitous as I'd been fascinated with real-time 3D rendering as early as 1988 on the humble Speccy, so I had a bit of a head start on the maths side of things.

You eventually left to help set up Warthog. Was it a very different challenge?
Initially, it was an absolute blast. We were stepping away from the safety of a guaranteed salary and the backup of a huge multi-national organisation, but we were forging our own destiny which, if successful, could reap big rewards and big projects. The first couple of years were scary – we had a lot of staff depending on us for their livelihoods. So we not only had to deliver the projects that were 'in flight', we had to be out there pitching for new future work too.

Was setting up your own studio a natural progression for many of those in the industry at this time?
Around the late Nineties, early Noughties the industry was shifting around from 'in-house' development teams to external 'work-for-hire' studios. It was a case of either 'working for the man' or giving it a go for yourself.

How much freedom did you find yourself having back then?



There was quite a bit of freedom in how games were developed and what technologies we used. The premise behind starting Warthog was that a bunch of experienced developers went into partnership with a couple of experienced businessmen. One group took care of making and pitching for the games, the other group took care of the business side of things: accounts, HR, management, becoming a public company and so on. Certainly, in the first half of the company's life, this worked very well but it had to evolve to survive.

Was it an easy decision to sell to Gizmondo?
By that time, we were just battling to keep the wolf from the door, so we bit their proverbial hands off.

Did you work closely on the development of Gizmondo's handheld?
When Gizmondo took over the studio, the hardware was mostly finished with all the decisions already taken so we just took care of the games and creating an SDK for developers. We had a lot of input into the structure of the Gizmondo Wide, however, cranking up the clock speed, adding an FPU, adding DMA and a programmable GPU. It failed, I guess, because the hardware wasn't up to the idea, the marketing was almost non-existent, and it couldn't compete with the newly released PSP in any way, shape or form.

How did your next venture, Embryonic, come about in 2005?
Embryonic was formed just as Gizmondo was imploding. A few of the guys who had been made redundant a few months before had started getting things together and had some work-for-hire sorted out. Once Gizmondo went out of business I joined my old colleagues: we were older and wiser and thought we'd give it one more shot. We had a few titles on the go and we were supplying art for Sony on *WipEout Pure*, a 3D Poker game for a local gambling company and a title based on Aqua Teen Hunger Force in development (don't ask).

I LOVED LEGO STAR WARS AND THOUGHT IT WAS A WORK OF GENIUS

But you were ultimately then bought out by Traveller's Tales in 2007 to become TT Fusion?
Yes, we got a phone call out of the blue from Jon Burton of Traveller's Tales which was on a stellar trajectory after the success of *LEGO Star Wars* to the point that they were having to turn work down. Jon was looking to buy a ready-made company that could manage itself and initially take care of all their handheld LEGO titles. I loved *LEGO Star Wars* and thought it was a work of genius so we bit Jon's hand off and were acquired by Traveller's Tales. We were renamed TT Fusion after our proprietary Fusion engine.

What was Traveller's Tales like?
It was still in the old barns out in rural Knutsford but had totally outgrown the premises. Jon had just bought a huge building in the centre of Knutsford so we all moved together. At the time, the studio was still being run like a little development house, very personable, which I must admit I kind of liked. It reminded me a lot of Warthog in the early days, just with the definite advantage of having Jon at the helm.

What was it about *LEGO Star Wars* that you loved so much?
I thought it was a stroke of genius: it ran at 60fps on PlayStation 2, it had the co-operative play and it had so much content that it had replayability by the bucketload. When we became part of Traveller's the team was just finishing *LEGO Star Wars 2 – The Original Trilogy*. They really knocked it out of the park and from that point I just knew they had struck gold.

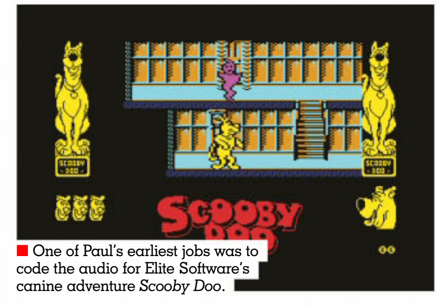
Have you had a passion for LEGO over the years yourself?
I was always a big LEGO fan. For me it still is the best toy in the world. Working on the LEGO titles only fuelled my love of it (to the detriment of my bank balance).

Why did you decide to leave TT this year after so many years?
Leaving TT was probably the saddest time in my career. I'd worked on 26 titles across every platform under the Sun with an utterly incredible team of guys and gals for the last 12 years. Alas, as we were focussing more and more on the new consoles, the need for our separate handheld game technology ceased being viable. In truth there was no real need for me anymore now our tech had been laid to rest, so we figured it was 'time'.

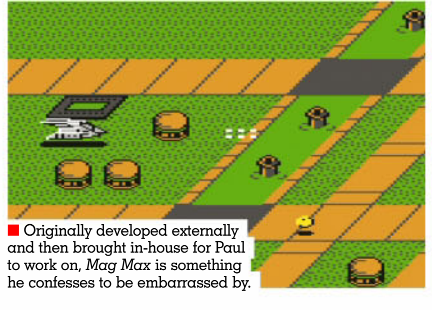
So, looking forward, what are your future plans? Are games still the focus?
Essentially after 35 years of non-stop game development, I'm having a bit of a sabbatical and working on some pet projects and pet technologies that I've been threatening to try out for years (as well as getting a decent holiday). I'll most definitely be playing with Unity now I have the chance; the likes of that and Unreal Engine are looking like the future of game development. Who knows what's to come, I can't imagine sitting on my backside for too long.



Paul has worked on computers and consoles spanning four decades, helped code *Looney Tunes: Back in Action* on the PlayStation 2 in 2003.



One of Paul's earliest jobs was to code the audio for Elite Software's canine adventure *Scooby Doo*.



Originally developed externally and then brought in-house for Paul to work on, *Mag Max* is something he confesses to be embarrassed by.

Altaïr's name in Arabic roughly translates to 'Flying One', hence the eagle sounds we suppose.

GAME CHANGERS

ASSASSIN'S CREED

Developer: Ubisoft Montreal **Publisher:** Ubisoft **Released:** 13 November 2007 **System:** Xbox 360, PS3

Remembering the real origin story of one of gaming's biggest franchises a decade on from its debut

THE BIGGEST FRANCHISES often have the humblest of beginnings. For Ubisoft, the road to establishing a billion-dollar brand began in 2003. Production had wrapped on *Prince Of Persia: Sands Of Time* and a team of aspiring developers, engineers and programmers were immediately tasked with taking the beloved action-platformer to the next level, envisioning a sequel that was bold, expressive and innovative. It didn't go as planned and they may have accidentally killed the series entirely. But what arose from the ashes was far greater and more potent in the marketplace, with the power to entice audiences outside of videogames, its allure seeping out into everything from cinema and comics, to toys and anime.

Assassin's Creed was born out of *Prince Of Persia: Assassin*, a game framed around a young boy, a prince, with special powers being captured by a dangerous new threat to Jerusalem. You were to embody the role of a deadly assassin, hellbent on securing the prince's safe passage home to the throne. The core concept came from the mind of *Sands Of Time* creative director Patrice Désilets, inspired by tales of Hassan-i-Sabbah, an Eleventh century missionary who was said to have founded the Asasiyun – or as we know them today, the assassins.

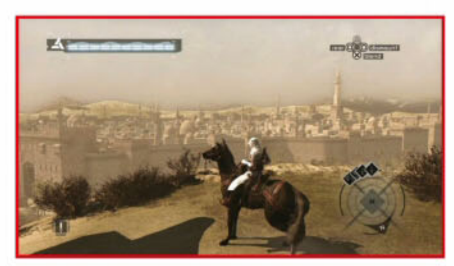
ASSASSIN'S CREED WAS AS PERFECT OF A MELDING OF ART AND DESIGN AS YOU COULD HOPE TO SEE IN 2007

Ubisoft liked it, but was ultimately confused: why had Désilets and a small team of 20 spent a year in pre-production on a title that didn't feature the Prince in a leading role? Instead of scrapping it entirely, Ubisoft allowed the *Sands Of Time* veterans to continue on the road it had started down and, in November of 2007, we had our first taste of it: *Assassin's Creed* landed and gave us an

MARIONETTE STRINGS

AN ODE TO THE ANIMUS AND HOW IT JUSTIFIED THE WORLD OF CREED







★ Looking at it today, the Animus seems like the perfect MacGuffin; a device that lets Ubisoft take us to anywhere in the world, to any period of known history. The science fiction and real-world elements may have become tempered in recent years, but back in 2007 it was integral to *Assassin's Creed*. The machine let Desmond experience the memories of his assassin ancestor Altaïr, working to explain away many of the idiosyncrasies of the experience. Repetitious dialogue and strange accents? A result of the Animus attempting to translate everything into English for Desmond. Game bugs and boring mission design? You are simply seeing streamlined fragments of Altaïr's memories. Cumbersome movement options? That's because Desmond is merely controlling Altaïr – each input on your controller corresponding to limbs rather than action directly, part of the unique Marionette input system. *Assassin's Creed* worked so hard to justify its fiction, in many ways it's a shame that that has disappeared over the years.

insight into the generation's most exciting development, the advancement of the open-world sandbox.

Across the game's three-year development cycle, the team had swollen from 20 to 120; the Scimitar engine had been created from scratch (known now as Anvil, a variation of it continues to power the AC games to this day), designed to house all of the components of this insanely ambitious open-world title. It might not look like much now, particularly when played next to 2017's stunning *Assassin's Creed Origins*, but back in 2007 we hadn't seen anything like it before – it was a true showcase to the power and potential of the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 consoles.

A new engine and story were just the beginning. At the heart of *Assassin's Creed* was to be its sandbox world, an element of its construction that has truly stood the test of time. Set in the Middle East during the Third Crusades, Ubisoft Montreal ushered in elements that were to be truly revolutionary for the time. This was to be a world that you didn't just pass through, but could inhabit entirely; a protagonist would take centre stage that was intimately familiar with their surroundings, able to freely traverse the environment with ease – storming through alleyways, scaling buildings and bounding across rooftops with wild abandon. *Assassin's Creed* may have ultimately suffered due to repetitious mission structure and loose combat mechanics, but its world and the AI that inhabited it impressed none the less. We were given the freedom to choose, not only how we were going to assassinate nine leading Templars, but in how we would approach them too – across a world that felt as if it were actually alive.

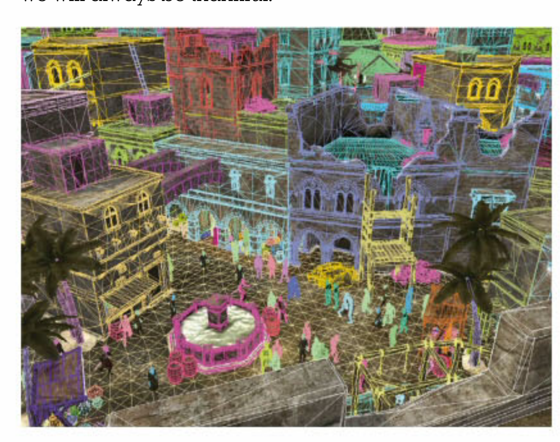
Enemy AI would be able to detect where you were and where you intended on going, the path-finding was advanced enough that it could track you across different planes of height and across sprawling distances as you headed out of the city walls. Ubisoft would also push its stealth elements out from the tightly scripted scenarios seen in *Splinter Cell*, focusing on what it called 'social stealth' – or the ability to blend in with your environment to dodge guards, divert attention and covertly track targets in the open-ended environments. Becoming lost as part of a crowd – gently pushing through the bustle of a busy street – highlighted a breadth and quality of animation that console players had rarely been treated to before this game.

Assassin's Creed was as perfect of a melding of art and design as you could hope to see in 2007. It set a standard that most every developer looking to build out open-world sandboxes in the decade to follow would study delicately; the construction of the city and the variety of systems at play every step of the way was truly astounding, when you think about it.

Ubisoft successfully constructed one of the biggest franchises in the videogame world in *Assassin's Creed* and its influence is still felt across the industry. Its fiction may have become labyrinthine – bordering on parody – in the intervening years, and the size of its worlds swollen to the point that the studio struggles to properly optimise them. But at the heart of it all is this divisive 2007 gem. In spite of its flaws, there are flashes of brilliance in its design, *Assassin's Creed* advanced stealth systems and sandbox open world, and for that we will always be thankful.

KEY FACTS

- *Assassin's Creed* was originally going to include a crossbow, but Ubisoft determined that ranged combat made the game too easy, not to mention historically inaccurate. You can even see it in the game's opening trailer on the menu.
- Altaïr is one of the only members of the order to have a missing finger. While Ubisoft has never confirmed why this is the case, it's believed that the master assassin cut his own off to accommodate a hidden blade of his own design.



GAME CHANGERS

THE GAMIFICATION OF HISTORY

LEARNING BAD HISTORY FROM GOOD VIDEOGAMES



ASSASSIN'S CREED II

Ubisoft has always marketed Assassin's Creed in the same way: that it was able to use 'history as its playground'. To its credit, it certainly is a playground wherein actual history collides with inane mutterings of conspiracy theorists. According to Assassin's Creed, just about everything good in this world is secretly a Templar organisation. NASA, for example is actually a Templar front, designed so that Buzz Aldrin could retrieve an Apple of Eden from the surface of the Moon.



CALL OF DUTY: BLACK OPS

Revisionist history is basically what Treyarch used to build the monstrous success of the *Black Ops* series. But that's all okay, because Call Of Duty's maddest instance of twisted history comes in the form of 'Five'; zombies are descending on Washington, and the only people that can stop them are John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon, Robert McNamara and Fidel Castro. So many millions likely played COD instead of doing their history homework, so who knows what people believe!



SID MEIER'S CIVILIZATION V

Civilization has always operated under its own historical methodology. The fact that you are able to start out in a relatively chill 4000BC and progress your civilisation through to 2050, ruling over everything from the smallest technological advances to sweeping milestones that change the face of your society. It's all nonsense, of course, as the game progression systems quickly overlap with historical timings, giving a warped (albeit fun) top-down view of history through the ages.



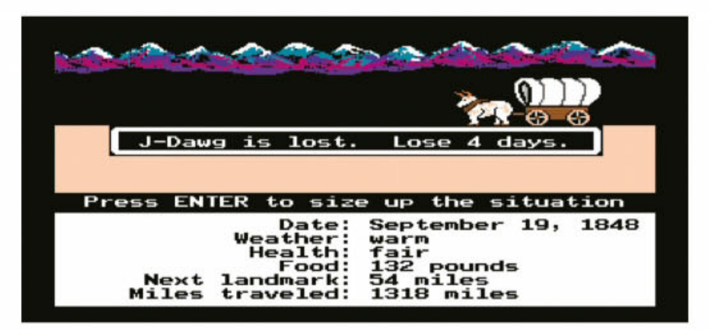
STATE OF EMERGENCY

VIS Entertainments' beloved *State Of Emergency* drew a lot of criticism upon its release due to its striking similarities to the 1999 riots in Seattle. It was denounced by Washington, particularly when it was discovered that the game's fictional antagonist establishment was the American Trade Organization, a close parallel to the very real World Trade Organization at the heart of the protest. It was manic, frenzied and *super* violent; probably not the way people should remember the famed riots.



THE SIMS

The Sims is directly responsible for setting false expectations in the hearts of millennials across the globe. As one of the most popular series of all time, *The Sims* quickly taught us that it would indeed be possible for us to hold down a steady job, own a large house in a bustling metropolis, and still find the time to foster healthy relationships and social lives. Looking back on it now, *The Sims* just seems like cruel revisionist history, giving millennials false hope in these trying times.



THE OREGON TRAIL

We won't lie, pretty much everything that we know about the historic ramble from Independence, Missouri to Oregon City, Oregon from the early 1800s we learned from MECC's iconic videogame. While *The Oregon Trail* itself was meticulously researched and rooted in reality, we're still not 100 per cent sold on the idea that almost every single journey across the trail would result in a mess of broken bones, diseases and multiple deaths by dysentery.



WORLD OF TANKS

World Of Tanks is actually pretty historically accurate; the tanks are all meticulously re-created, giving players an incredible insight into the nightmarish hell that these vehicles must have been like to operate back during World War II. Plus it taught us, and we never learned this at school, that all a giant tank needs to do to avoid detection from an enemy is hide in large bushes. How our generals never figured that magnificent tactic out we will never understand.



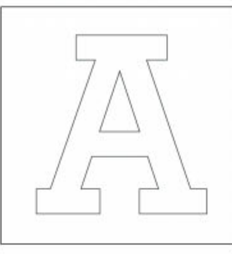
ROME TOTAL WAR

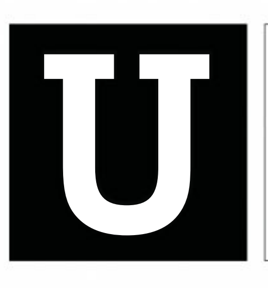
Rome: Total War is largely accurate to history, but you shouldn't take everything you learn from this revolutionary RTS into class. There are small inaccuracies – Creative Assembly managed to conflate the differences between the Greek and Macedonian-style phalanxes (pfft, amateurs) – while the speed of communication and execution of manoeuvres on the battlefield is oversold. War was messy in Roman times, which is only accurately portrayed here if you're super bad at the game.

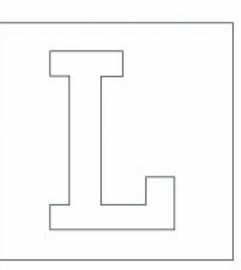
TOYS | PERIPHERALS | APPAREL | GADGETS | BOOKS

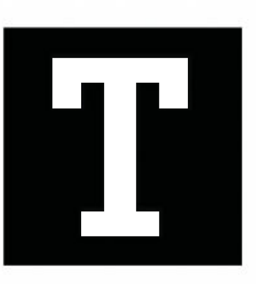
THE











The Dropmix app works on iOS and Android, so a smartphone or tablet is all you need to get the game going out of the box.

Placing cards on the Dropmix deck will add a new section or beat to the song. The card on top is always the one in play. We still can't explain mechanically how that's possible.

Special cards like this one can completely change the shape of a board in competitive play, or just really change up the beat for a fun party mix.

The colour-coding of the cards makes it really easy to see where you can place them and what they will change about the track being played. Some cards have multiple functions.

DROPMIX

MANUFACTURER: **HASBRO** PRICE: **£119.99**

WE'D BE HARD PRESSED TO ARGUE THAT DROPMIX IS A VIDEOGAME, BUT THE FACT THAT IT'S BEEN MADE BY HARMONIX, IN COLLABORATION WITH HASBRO, CERTAINLY GOT OUR ATTENTION. That so much of the experience of playing Dropmix feels like it's drawing from some of the great work Harmonix has done in the past certainly gives the game a lot of extra weight, too.

At its core, this is an interactive app/board-game hybrid in which you can mix and match audio samples into full tracks, and play competitively with friends to mix and edit tracks on the fly. To be more specific, Dropmix is a board with five card slots, each representing a different portion of a musical track, and you are furnished with a deck of colour-coded cards to drop into those gaps.

Still not getting it? Well, each card is a specific piece of a song, such as the vocals or drums, for example. Placing a card on the deck activates that portion of the track. You then add the synths or back-beat of something else to the deck, and it mixes in seamlessly. The amazing array or remixes and the diversity of styles it manages to incorporate is very nearly mind-blowing, until you remember it's Harmonix making this.

This is classic work from the music game developer. Being able to simplify and make accessible the kind of track-remixing and sampling methods that would normally be confined to a recording studio – and then, on top of that, make them into a gamified experience to share with friends – is stunning.

With 60 cards in the box and several expansion packs available, there's a mass of variety here. It does cost quite a bit when you add it all up, but compared to *Rock Band* or a high-end board game, it's good value for money, and perfect if you already have a bunch of friends who like to hang out playing games on a Friday night.

VERDICT 9/10

GAMING CLOTHING



PLAYING WITH POWER

This wonderful homage to the great and glorious Game Boy is packed full of classic sprites from the handheld's most famous releases. Honouring both its black and white imagery, as well as the classic green hue of the original releases, it's a great design.
www.qwertee.com



THAT'S ALL FOLKS!

Managing to merge a reference to classic *Looney Tunes* cartoons with *Cuphead*'s notorious difficulty, we're liking this clash of worlds a lot. While others have turned to the darker side of the constant death in this game, this approach is far better.
www.qwertee.com



WINNER WINNER CHICKEN DINNER

Celebrating the famous win screen of *PlayerUnknown's Battlegrounds* with a grungy re-creation of the iconic game artwork, we're guessing the coming year is going to be packed with *PUBG* shirts hoping to match the quality of this one.
www.qwertee.com

VR ACCESSORIES FOR GAMERS AND DEVS



MANUS VR

PRICE: **€1,000**

Similar to Avatar VR, the Manus system offers arm tracking and haptic feedback in the gloves. Both are targeted largely at the development world, but are a fantastic showcase of the kind of VR tech that's coming down the line.
WWW.MANUS-VR.COM



RIG 4VR

PRICE: **£59.99**

You'll find plenty of good headphone options out there that are more or less compatible with the PSVR headset, and by that we obviously mean they can fit around the gear. This is still our favourite though, and one of the best.
WWW.PLANTRONICS.COM



AVATAR VR

PRICE: **€1,100**

Taking things up a level for VR control, we have this body kit from Neurodigital Techonologies. Tracking on both arms as well as haptic feedback in the gloves means you have an unprecedented level of control and response.
WWW.NEURODIGITAL.COM



PLAYSTATION VR AIM CONTROLLER

PRICE: **£49.99 (WITH FARPOINT)**

The Aim controller brings exactly the level of tactile accuracy to VR shooters that we had been looking for, allowing you to virtually look down the barrel of your gun. You should be able to find it with a copy of *Farpoint* too, which is a solid VR shooter.
WWW.GAME.CO.UK



LEAP MOTION

PRICE: **€79.99**

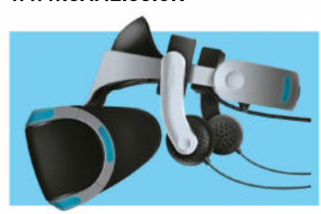
Offering an interesting hands-free alternative for motion control inside VR, the Leap Motion works very nicely as a standalone controller, but mounted to a VR headset, it gives you motion control on a different level. Worth keeping an eye on.
WWW.LEAPMOTION.COM




TPCAST WIRELESS ADAPTER FOR VIVE

PRICE: **£319**

Currently available in the UK via Scan, Alternate and Overclockers, this is the piece of kit that anyone who has used an HTC Vive headset has been calling out for. We hope to see wireless tech proliferate in time, but if you're in a hurry, here's your solution.
WWW.TPCASTVR.COM



MANTIS HEAD-PHONES FOR PSVR

PRICE: **$49.99**

Returning to some simpler home enhancements, the Mantis headphones are a wonderfully designed audio solution for Sony's VR headset. By clipping onto the arms of the headset, you get adjustability and comfort without a headband squeezing your head.
WWW.BIONIKGAMING.COM



OR100

PRICE: **£69.99**

Similar to the Mantis headphones for the PSVR, these JBL earphones bypass the issue of headbands and space on your head by attaching to the device itself, in this instance the Oculus Rift. These headphones are also wireless, which makes them even more practical.
UK.JBL.COM

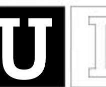
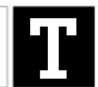


PSVR PROTECTION CASE

PRICE: **£26**

It may seem obvious, but having a carry case for your PSVR strikes us as essential, not least because introducing others to VR is our duty as card-carrying VR evangelists. This official case is perfectly moulded for the device.
WWW.AMAZON.CO.UK

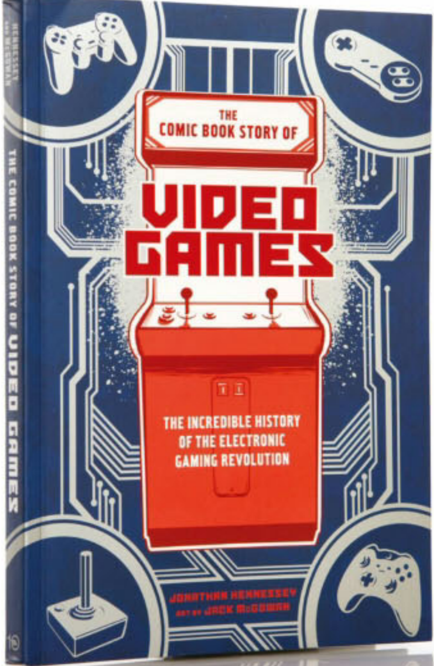




THE COMIC BOOK STORY OF VIDEOGAMES

PUBLISHER: **COOK & BECKER**



CONCENTRATING LARGELY ON GAMING'S EARLIEST YEARS, LEADING UP TO THE EMERGENCE AND DOMINANCE OF THE JAPANESE CONSOLE MAKERS FROM THE MID-EIGHTIES ONWARDS, THIS FASCINATING HISTORY OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY WOULD SEEM A LITTLE LIGHT ON DETAIL IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE FACT THAT IT'S A FULLY FLEDGED GRAPHIC NOVEL.

Having the tech industry and games boom illustrated in this way is really quite unique, and something we would have expected more from a story about the birth of computing in general (although that's in here). Perhaps it says something about the place of the industry in our lives now that such a book can find success.

Anyway, Jonathan Hennessey has a background in historical graphic-novel writing, having tackled The US Constitution and The Gettysburg Address previously, and he does a fine job of compressing the build-up to what made games possible, all the way to the *Minecraft* boom, into 192 pages (albeit with the post-PlayStation era given limited space at the end).

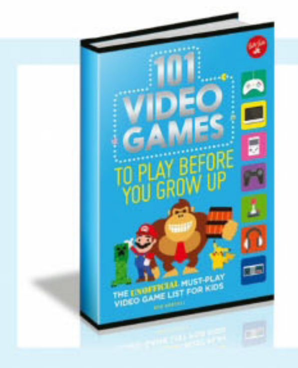
The art from Jack McGowan has a rather frazzled, kinetic quality to it, which gives the whole book a lot of energy, and he's managed to capture the likenesses of some of gaming's most famous luminaries rather nicely, such as Nolan Bushnell and Shigeru Miyamoto.

The detail and narrative thread that this book manages to weave makes its educational value for anyone looking for a light and accessible way to learn about the birth of the industry unquestionable. As a graphic-novel fan, the art style may not be for everyone, and the narrative structure doesn't flow in a way that might be thoroughly pleasing for anyone not invested fully in the history, but it's a commendable and enjoyable effort all the same.

www.amazon.co.uk



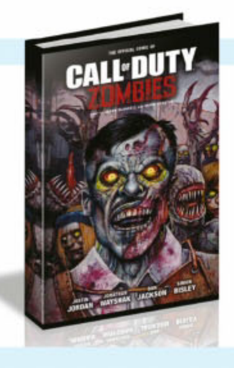
VERDICT 8/10



101 VIDEOGAMES TO PLAY BEFORE YOU GROW UP

Pitched as a book with games for all the family, it makes sense that author Ben Bertoli has spent time as both a games journalist and teacher, as this offers a little of both fields in its delivery. Following this guide would be a great way to introduce kids to some of the classics.

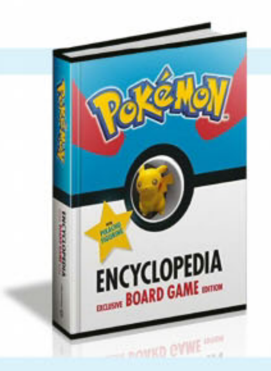
www.forbiddenplanet.com



CALL OF DUTY: ZOMBIES

There's a lot more story to the seemingly off-the-cuff exploration of the undead in the Call Of Duty series than you might think, and this new graphic novel explores that further. The book follows the characters from *Call Of Duty: Black Ops II* and *Black Ops III*.

www.darkhorse.com



POKÉMON ENCYCLOPEDIA

Offering a comprehensive look at every creature from the Pokémon universe, as well as a Pikachu figurine and pull-out board game with tile pieces to play as well, this is a book with a lot of different facets to it. A winner for any younger fans out there.

www.forbiddenplanet.com



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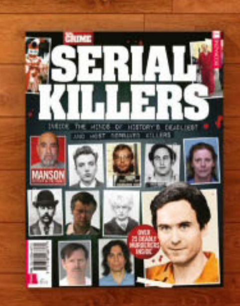


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